LION'S ROAR

Deep Dive *into* Meditation

LION'S ROAR

Lion's Roar is an independent non-profit whose mission is to communicate Buddhist wisdom and practices in order to benefit people's lives, and to support the development of Buddhism in the modern world. Projects of Lion's Roar include Lion's Roar magazine, Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly, lionsroar.com, and Lion's Roar Special Editions and Online Learning.

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The Heart of This Moment

Mindfulness, relaxation, and clarity are just some of the benefits that accompany a basic meditation practice. It can also reduce pain and stress while improving your mental health. Beginner meditation techniques are simple; if you can breathe, you can meditate. In this step-by-step guide on how to meditate, we answer your questions.

What Is Meditation?

Before you learn how to meditate, it's helpful to know what meditation is. The most common form of meditation is breath meditation, or mindfulness meditation, in which you bring your attention to your breathing. While breathing in and out, observe when and how your mind wanders to thoughts — for example, everyday stresses of relationships and work — and then return your focus to your breath. By learning to continually bring your attention to your breath and releasing your thoughts without judgment, you

are training your consciousness to remain in the present moment. Making this a habit can lead to an emotionally stable state of mental clarity.

"The practice of meditation helps us to release the tension — within the body, within the mind, within the emotions — so that healing can take place," says Thich Nhat Hanh, the famed teacher of mindfulness and meditation.

Healing through meditation can take many forms. There are meditation practices that help manage daily stress and anxiety. There are meditations that reduce pain; promote relaxation; and others that enhance empathy and compassion. Other forms of meditation include the body scan, walking meditation, and loving-kindness, or metta meditation.

How to Meditate

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO BASIC MINDFULNESS MEDITATION
Here's how to meditate. Find a quiet, uplifting place where you can do your meditation practice. When starting out, try to allow 5 minutes for the practice. Listen to the guided audio meditation in our "Guided Audio" section, or follow along with the audio or written instructions below.

1) Take your seat. Sit cross-legged and upright on a meditation cushion or on a straight-backed chair with your feet flat on the floor. Try not to lean against the back of the chair.

2) Find your sitting posture. Place your hands palms-down on your thighs and sit in an upright posture with a straight back — relaxed yet dignified. With your eyes open, let your gaze rest comfortably as you look slightly downward about six feet in front of you.

3) Notice and follow your breath. Place your attention lightly on your out-breath, while remaining aware of your environment. Be with each breath as the air goes out through your mouth and nostrils and dissolves into the space around you.

At the end of each out-breath, simply rest until the next in-breath naturally begins. For a more focused meditation, you can follow both the out-breaths and in-breaths.

4) Note the thoughts and feelings that arise. Whenever you notice that a thought, feeling, or perception has taken your attention away from the breath, just say to yourself, "thinking," and return to following the breath. No need to judge yourself when this happens; just gently note it and attend to your breath and posture.

5) End your session. After the allotted time, you can consider your meditation practice period over. But there's no need to give up any sense of calm, mindfulness, or openness you've experienced. See if you can consciously allow these to remain present through the rest of your day.

You've just meditated!

Why Should I Meditate?

Quiet The Mind

Some people may meditate to develop insight into the true nature of reality; others, to help deal with stress or relieve pain. The Tibetan Buddhist teacher the 17th Karmapa says meditation awakens a trust that we are full of wisdom and compassion. Meditation can simply calm an excited mind, relieving stress and anxiety while relaxing the body. Meditation master Ajahn Chah explains: "As you meditate, your mind will get quieter and quieter, like a still forest pool. Many wonderful and rare animals will come to drink at the pool, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha."

Develop Mindfulness & Insight

Meditation also fosters a wider awareness, or mindfulness, that can provoke profound realization. This process can help cut through unhelpful misconceptions and encourage a more open,

compassionate relationship with yourself. For this reason, meditation practice is considered to have long-lasting mental health benefits.

Cultivate Positive Qualities

Additionally, we might meditate to specifically cultivate certain positive traits. Buddhist teacher Pema Chödrön lists five key qualities that emerge through meditation practice: steadfastness, clear seeing, courage, attention, and an easeful feeling of "no big deal," where perhaps that might not have been the case for you previously. Meditation can improve your attention, resilience, compassion, and relationships.

You don't have to be Buddhist to meditate. The Buddha taught meditation as an essential tool for any of us to achieve liberation from suffering.

Follow The Science

Numerous studies on the science of meditation have proved its many benefits, including its ability to:

- Sharpen attention
- Increase compassion
- Reduce stress
- Boost patience
- Improve mental health

How Do You Make Meditation a Habit?

There's no denying it: meditation is more effective when you do it regularly. One of the biggest challenges for meditators of all experience levels is maintaining a regular practice. When you're just getting started, it can help to set a dedicated space in your home. You may wish to include a meditation cushion (sometimes called a zafu) or meditation bench. But meditating in a chair is fine too. Just be aware of your posture, sitting solidly and straight-backed as is comfortable for you.

While there are many benefits of regular meditation practice, forming a good habit can be difficult. Here is a list of tips and techniques that can help you make sticking with your meditation practice a part of your everyday routine:

1) CREATE A ROUTINE

Try practicing meditation the same way each time. Repeating the same action — the same small rituals — again and again, renders a habit automatic after some time. Create a cue for meditating. Some meditators set an alarm or a reminder on their phone.

Sit in the same place every time. Consider lighting a candle and/or incense before meditating. Time, place, sight, and smell can all be prompts to meditate, fortifying and strengthening your practice. (See also "5 Ways to Get Into the Meditation Habit.")

2) TAKE SMALL STEPS

Make yourself a promise you know you are able to keep. Start small and increase your practice from there. If you are just beginning to meditate, dedicate yourself to a very doable five minutes. Even after meditating for just two consecutive mornings, you've begun building a habit into your routine.

3) MEDITATE WITH OTHERS

Having a regular meditation practice with someone else can also be beneficial. Try joining a Buddhist group in your area. If you can't practice with somebody you live with or with a Buddhist group, you can sit with a meditation buddy via Zoom. Sitting with others regularly is a great support to your daily practice at home. Going it alone is ok, but a practice can be very fulfilling to share with other people.

4) KEEP YOUR EXPECTATIONS LOW

A lifetime of meditation can be transformational. A single session of meditation can feel underwhelming. It is often a win-some-lose-some scenario. Many people go into meditation expecting to achieve inner peace the first time they sit down, but we don't expect to understand Italian the first time we walk into a language course. So cut yourself some slack but keep at it and see what happens when you've established a meditation habit.

5) MAKE IT ENJOYABLE

In order to keep coming back, find a way to make meditation enjoyable. Your meditation space should look pleasing to your eye and be comfortable. You might consider adding a cushion, stool, or chair, some incense, and some artwork. Some meditators set up an altar.

Your practice itself should also be physically pleasing. When you sit, scan your senses for something you enjoy. Rest your mind upon the sound of your breath, the weight of your hands on your knees, or some part of your body that feels good. Try various cushions or chairs if sitting is painful. You can also ask a teacher for tips about posture when meditating.

Alternatively, you could make a walking meditation your habit. Any form of practice contains some discomfort and pain, but it's not supposed to be torture. Be flexible in your practice to reduce pain.

6) BE KIND TO YOURSELF

New habits are easy to start, but sometimes enthusiasm can begin to wane. Don't beat yourself up. Don't get angry and berate yourself over and over when you catch your mind wandering. That will lead to burnout. Your mind will wander! So when you bring your focus back to your breath, be content that you managed that.

Even if the whole meditation feels compromised by obtrusive thoughts, you still did it. Tell yourself "Good job!" You'll look forward to the next time you sit.

7) ENJOY THE CHALLENGE!

Some meditators become bored and just sit to sit without actually trying to meditate. But the rewarding challenge of meditation is to use every technique at our disposal to continue focusing.

Frequently Asked Questions About Meditation

If I am thinking during meditation, is that bad?

It's not bad at all—in fact, it's perfectly natural. Your mind is a machine that's built, in part, for thinking. Meditation is all about being able to take notice of how the mind works—we're observing our thoughts as they arise. The tricky part is to let those thoughts go just as easily as they arise. It takes time and effort, but every experience of meditation is a step in the right direction.

As Pema Chödrön tells us, "We're instructed that when our mind has wandered off, without any harshness or judgmental quality, we should acknowledge that as 'thinking" and return to the outbreath. We train in coming back to this moment of being here. In the process of doing this, our fogginess, our bewilderment, our ignorance begin to transform into clear seeing. 'Thinking'

becomes a code word for seeing 'just what is' — both our clarity and our confusion. We are not trying to get rid of thoughts. Rather we are clearly seeing our defense mechanisms, our negative beliefs about ourselves, our desires and our expectations. We also see our kindness, our bravery, our wisdom.

What do I do with my eyes during meditation?

You can meditate with your eyes open or closed. A good approach is to look slightly downward, letting your gaze fall about six feet in front of you, keeping it in soft focus and relaxed, neither too tight nor too loose.

What do i do with my hands during meditation?

Hand positions are known as mudras. There are two mudras commonly used in Buddhist meditation. You can do one called "resting the mind," by placing your hands palm down on your knees, with the upper arms parallel to the torso, enabling your hands to relax and your back to remain straight, but not stiff.

The other hand position you can try is the "cosmic mudra," which is often used in Zen. In this position, rest your right hand in your lap palm up with your left hand laying gently on top of it, also

palm up. Touch your thumbs together, creating an oval below the navel. When the oval often begins to collapse as our focus strays or we grow sleepy, it reminds us to wake up.

Do I have to sit on the floor in some special way?

The most common way to meditate might be in full lotus posture, but how many of us can physically do that? There are various ways to sit when meditating: Some meditators sit cross-legged, on a cushion, or kneeling.

If you need to sit on a chair, that's okay too! Your posture should make you feel grounded and relaxed. If you sit in the chair, your spine should be straight and your feet flat on the ground, with your hips higher than your knees. Meditation is not always comfortable, but it shouldn't be painful. Experiment with different sitting postures. Choose the posture that fits your body.

How long should I meditate?

You can meditate for as long, or as short, as you'd like. Any amount of time spent meditating is good, no matter how brief. Your meditation practice can be just 5 minutes. A starting point for beginners is 30 minutes but meditate for long enough that your mind and body calm. Once you are calm and relaxed, you can truly start your meditation practice. Sit long enough to go through the calming phase with time left to enjoy and benefit from meditation.

What if sound dstracts me?

It is often suggested that beginner meditators find a quiet place to meditate so that they can focus. If you can't find quiet, then simply sit with the noise. Becoming comfortable with "what is" is a big part of meditating, and that includes traffic noise, your neighbor's TV, or loud music. Observe your frustration without judgment while sitting. Learn to continue sitting through less-than-ideal circumstances.

Is meditation painful?

Even during meditation, pain can't always be avoided. Our bodies sometimes suffer "growing pains" while adjusting to sitting. Meditation experts advise first to notice the pain as an object of meditation: Does the pain come and go? Who is encountering the pain? Try following your breath and see if you experience some relief.

The experts have different pointers about how to react if the pain still seems too much to endure. Some encourage you to adjust your posture to find relief. Others take a firmer stance, suggesting you hold your position and meditate on the pain. Try to sit as still as you can—you'll find real benefit there—but be mindful that it is your choice. Either way, meditation shouldn't be tormenting.

Can meditation support mental health?

Sometimes. Researchers (and, certainly, meditators over millennia) have found that meditation can support mental health. However, meditation is not a replacement for therapy or medication. When improperly used to address mental illness, meditation can be ineffective or even detrimental.

Most Western practitioners find that a combination of meditation and psychology is the most effective way to liberate ourselves from trauma, bad habits, and negative feelings. While meditation provides insight into the nature of thoughts and emotions, psychotherapy engages with their substance. If you're interested in meditating for mental health, talk to a medical professional.

Are there different types of meditation?

New meditators often start with practices that calm the mind, like following the breath. If your brain is jumping from thought to thought you can't take the next step that results from a focused mind: seeing deeply into the nature of reality or insight. That being said, there are other methods to anchor the mind.

These meditations include Body Scan, during which you focus your attention on an area of the body or bodily sensations in a slow progression from your feet to your head.

Some people practice Walking Meditation. While out on a walk, try noticing as each foot touches the ground – follow your footsteps as you would follow your breath. Can you sync the moving of your legs with the rise and fall of the breath?

Another popular meditation is Tonglen, which translates to "giving and taking." Pema Chödrön defines this practice "How to Practice Tonglen" as visualizing "taking in the pain of others with every in-breath and sending out whatever will benefit them on the out-breath."

Similarly, Metta, or "loving-kindness," is a meditation practice in which you conjure thoughts of various people — loved ones, not-so-loved ones, and others including yourself, who and allow "loving-kindness" (sometimes thought of as friendliness) to rise in your heart and mind.

How to Practice Walking Meditation

Think of walking meditation as mobile meditating where you center your full concentration on moving your body. The practice is an essential aspect of meditation retreats and is used to counterbalance and transfer the power of sitting meditation. Consider it a way to include your practice into your routine. Here's how to do a walking meditation:

Begin walking in a peaceful place. Bring your focus to your feet, shifting your weight from one side to the other.

Raising your right leg, take note of your body's weight redistributing. Focus on what your left side needs to do to keep balanced. Step forward, putting the heel on the earth and rolling onto the ball of the foot. As your weight switches, take note how the heel of your left foot starts to rise. Step forward with the left foot, repeating the process.

Verbal prompts can be a way to create harmony and rhythm during your walking meditation. As your thoughts start to stray, use an easy cue like "lifting, moving, placing" to remind yourself to return your thoughts to the body. Integrating a simple verse to assist the practice is a technique utilized by Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. Here's one that might be used for walking meditation:

(Breathing in) "I have arrived";
(Breathing out) "I am home."
(Breathing in) "In the here";
(Breathing out) "In the now."
(Breathing in) "I am solid";
(Breathing out) "I am free."
(Breathing in) "In the ultimate";
(Breathing out) "I dwell."

At the outset of this form of meditation, you might note that your footsteps are very deliberate and mechanical. Try to discover more fluidness as you link your breathing with the way your body moves. Consider dropping the phrases for a while and focus on your body before returning to the vocal cues.

Begin with about a ten-minute walking meditation, gradually working up to half an hour.

When you have completed your meditation, try standing still, finding the energy in your body and noticing what is still.

How to Practice Metta, or Loving-kindness Meditation

In our culture, people find it difficult to direct loving-kindness to themselves. We may feel that we are unworthy, or that it's egotistical, or that we shouldn't be happy when other people are suffering. So rather than start loving-kindness practice with ourselves, which is traditional, I find it more helpful to start with those we most naturally love and care about. One of the beautiful principles of compassion and loving-kindness practices is that we start where it works, where it's easiest. We open our heart in the most natural way, then direct our loving-kindness little by little to the areas where it's more difficult.

1) First, sit comfortably and at ease, with your eyes closed. Sense yourself seated here in this mystery of human life. Take your seat halfway between heaven and Earth, as the Buddha did, then bring a kind attention to yourself. Feel your body seated and your breath breathing naturally.

Think of someone you care about and love a lot. Then let natural phrases of good wishes for them come into your mind and heart. Some of the traditional ones are, "May you be safe and protected," "May you be healthy and strong," and "May you be truly happy."

2) Then picture a second person you care about and express the same good wishes and intentions toward them.

3) Next, imagine that these two people whom you love are offering you their loving-kindness. Picture how they look at you with concern and love as they say, "May you too be safe and protected. May you be healthy and strong. May you be truly happy."

4) Take in their good wishes. Now turn them toward yourself. Sometimes people place their hand on their heart or their body as they repeat the phrases: "May I be safe and protected. May I be healthy and strong. May I be truly happy."

5) With the same care let your eyes open, look around the room, and offer your loving-kindness to everyone around you. Feel how great it is to spread the field of loving-kindness.

6) Now think of yourself as a beacon, spreading the light of loving-kindness like a lighthouse around your city, around the country, around the world, even to distant planets. Think, "May all beings far and near, all beings young and old, beings in every direction, be held in great loving-kindness. May they be safe and protected. May they be healthy and strong. May they be truly happy."

The Buddha said that the awakened heart of loving-kindness and freedom is our birthright as human beings. "If these things were not possible," he said, "I would not teach them. But because they are possible for you, I offer these teachings of the dharma of awakening."

Next Steps

There are many ways you can bolster your meditation practice. Reading Buddhist texts and practicing with others, including meditation teachers, can keep you on the path of awakening. Understanding how your mind works can enable us to feel happier and healthier. The helpful resources from Lion's Roar below will help get you started on your meditation journey.
Taken from the Lion's Roar How To Meditate page. Visit for audio resources and more.

How to Start a Home Meditation Practice

Zen teacher Norman Fischer proposes a two-week trial run to get your meditation practice started and looks at how to deal with some of the obstacles you may encounter.

Thousands of people over the years have asked me for advice about how to establish a daily meditation practice at home. Although there are thousands of Buddhist meditation centers around the country, most meditators do some or all of their practice at home on their own. In many cases, this is a practical matter. Most people don't live close enough to a Buddhist center to meditate there regularly. Or, for one reason or another, they don't feel comfortable with any of the local centers available to them. Or they feel that for them meditation is a private and personal matter, not a communal religious practice. Anyway, most meditators, for a variety of reasons, meditate at home. I do myself.

It wasn't that way when I began Zen practice. The conventional wisdom then was that you could never practice on your own. You needed to practice with others—that was the way it was done. You needed instructions from a teacher. You needed support—maintaining the disciple to sit on your own would be too difficult. Besides, meditating alone could be dangerous.

Conventional wisdom has changed. These days many people find that it is entirely possible to meditate on their own. Not that lack of discipline is unknown—keeping up with regular practice remains a struggle for some. But many go beyond struggle to find enjoyment and ease in their daily practice.

When people ask me how to get a home meditation practice started, here is what I tell them: the practice begins the night before. Before you go to sleep, set the alarm for half an hour earlier than usual, and say to yourself: "Tomorrow morning I am going to get up to sit. I want to do this, and it is going to be pleasant and helpful." Hold that thought in your mind. Then, as you are falling asleep, say this: "Am I actually going to wake up early and meditate?" And answer yourself: "Yes, I am." And then question yourself again: "Really?" Take this seriously. Think a little more and answer yourself honestly. If the answer is, "Yes, really," then you will get up. You are serious about it. But if the answer is, "No, I

have to admit that I am probably going to reset the alarm and turn over to get that delicious extra half hour of sleep," then save yourself the trouble. Reset the alarm now and don't even try to get up.

This little exercise may sound silly but it is very important. It addresses the main difficulty we have with self discipline: we are ambivalent. We both do and don't want to do what we think we want to do in our own best interests. We find it difficult to take our good intentions seriously, especially when it comes to our spiritual lives. We have confusion at our core about whether we are capable of confronting ourselves at the deepest possible human level—maybe if we do we will find ourselves to be unworthy, trivial people. Since we imagine that meditation promises a self-confrontation at this level, we are deeply ambivalent.

Most of this convoluted thinking is not conscious. This is why the before-bed self-dialog is important. It provides a simple way of confronting the issue. "Really?" It's a way to surface what we really feel and, gently and honestly, deal with it. Otherwise our long habit of sneaky self-deception will likely prevail. We will not do what we're not really clear we want to do, which will give us further evidence that we can't do it.

Assuming you do get out of bed in the morning, splash cold water on your face, rinse out your mouth, put on some comfortable clothes (or stay in your sleeping clothes if you want), and

immediately sit on your cushion. Do this before you have coffee, before you turn on the computer, before you activate your day and realize you don't have time for this. Burn a stick of incense to time yourself, or use a clock or one of the many excellent meditation timers now on the market (which will prevent clock-watching). Decide in advance to sit for twenty to thirty minutes. A bit more is good if you can do it.

Try this for two weeks, taking a day or so off each week. If you miss a day, that's OK. Don't fall into the unconscious trap that "Since I missed a day I guess I can't do this, so I might as well not even try, or try less hard tomorrow because this missed day has weakened me." This is the way we think! So anticipate this and don't fall for it. Be gentle with yourself, but firm. Imagine that you are training a child, or a puppy—a cute little creature who means well but definitely needs adult guidance.

Decide in advance that you will meditate for two weeks. It is much easier to commit to meditating almost every day for two weeks than committing yourself to meditate every day for the rest of your life. After two weeks, stop and ask yourself, "How was that? Was it pleasant or unpleasant? What impact did it have on my morning, on the rest of my day, on my week?" Usually positive results are apparent, and, seeing that the practice has been beneficial, you develop a stronger intention to return to it. So then, after a hiatus, commit again to practice, maybe now for a month,

with the same break built in for evaluation. In this way, little by little. you can become a regular meditator. Taking breaks from time to time doesn't change that.

Many people ask, "Is it necessary to do this in the morning? Is there some magic to the morning? I am not a morning person." Yes, I think there is magic to the morning. Monastic schedules the world over include early morning practice. Practice seems most beneficial at that time of day, when your psyche is in a liminal state and the world around you has not quite awakened. Also, you are more likely to do it in the morning, before your day gets engaged and you remember all the things you need to do. In the middle of the day it is harder to rein yourself in, and at the end of the day you may be too tired or wound up. You may feel more like a glass of wine than meditation practice, which will likely feel pretty uncomfortable as your body notices all the aches and strains and kinks of the day. Actually, practice at the end of the day is very good for just this reason—while often uncomfortable, it does help you process all your stress and feel calmer afterward. But if you are trying to establish a fledgling practice, thinking you will sit restfully at the end of the day is probably not going to work as well as catching yourself at your weakest (which is to say your strongest): in the morning, when you are both more and less yourself, before you have fully assumed the armored, heroic personality with which you feel you must approach the world of work and family. (I must note here the obvious fact that all of this might not

be true for you: we differ enormously as individuals, and in these intimate matters one size does not fit all. I am describing what I have found to be true for myself, and for many other meditators).

There are many approaches to meditation. In my tradition, the Soto Zen tradition, meditation is not considered a skill that we are supposed to master. It is a practice that we devote ourselves to. So if you are meditating in the morning feeling half asleep, with dream-snatches passing by, and your mind not crispy focused precisely on the breath, the way you think it is supposed to be… this is perfectly all right. It is considered normal and possibly even beneficial. The biggest obstacle to establishing a meditation practice is the erroneous idea (firmly held by most people who want to establish a meditation practice) that meditation should calm and focus the mind. Therefore, if your mind is not calm and focused, you are certainly doing it wrong. Struggling with something that you are consistently doing wrong, and in your frustration can't seem to get right, does not inspire you to continue (unless you are a masochist, and there are more than a few meditating masochists).

Better to assume the Soto Zen attitude that meditation is what you do when you meditate. There is no doing it wrong or right. That is not to say that there is no effort, no calm, no focus. Of course there is. The point is to avoid falling into the trap of defining meditation too narrowly, and then judging yourself based on

that definition, and so sabotaging yourself. You evaluate your practice on a much wider and more generous calculus. Not: Is my mind concentrated while I am sitting? But: How is my attention during the day? Not: Am I peaceful and still as I sit? But: Is my habit of flying off the handle reducing somewhat? In other words, the test of meditation isn't meditation. It's your life.

Dealing with the various practical obstacles to regular meditation is easy compared with the deeper self-deception issues I have been talking about. Once you get a handle on these, the practical problems are easy. Kids get up early? Then get up half an hour earlier than they do. But that's not enough sleep? Well, that half hour of sitting will be much more important for your rest and well-being than the lost half hour of sleep. Or you can just go to bed half an hour earlier.

No place to meditate? There is always somewhere—all you need is the space for a cushion on the floor. But better to have a clean and well-cared-for spot, even if only in a corner of an otherwise busy messy room. Keeping that corner neat and clear is a preliminary to the meditation practice itself.

Your spouse doesn't want to meditate and resents that you're sneaking out of bed to sit? Patiently explain to your spouse that the main reason you are meditating is to become a more loving and helpful person. You are sneaking out of bed not to assert your

independence but for the opposite reason: to be more loving. Have that conversation (lovingly) with your spouse. Ask them to help you do this two-week experiment and evaluate the results: have you been more loving, have you helped around the house, with the kids, etc., more than usual, with more willingness, more cheerfulness? (Of course, having had this conversation, you now have to do these things.)

In short, if you want to meditate there is virtually no excuse not to. But human confusion is very clever, so it is still possible to talk yourself out of it. If so, be my guest. Sometimes that's the way to finally begin serious meditation practice: by not doing it for ten or twenty years, until finally there is no choice.

As the world speeds up and history's trajectory becomes more drastic, more people are feeling the need to do something to promote well-being and foster a sustainable attitude. It is difficult to remain cheerful if you are under stress, difficult to believe in goodness and happiness if the world you live in doesn't offer much support for them. Gentle and realistic, meditation practice can provide the powerful attitudinal boost we need. It doesn't require pre-existing faith or excessive effort; simply sitting in silence, returning to the present moment of body and breath, will naturally bring you closer to gratitude, closer to kindness. And as you

commit yourself to these virtues you will begin to notice, to your surprise, that many people in your life are also doing this, so there is plenty of companionship along the way.

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You Are the Great Perfection

Rest in your true nature without effort or distraction — Mingyur Rinpoche teaches the renowned practice of Dzogchen.

You are already perfect. You are already a buddha. In fact, there's no difference between your true nature, right now as you sit reading this, and the true nature of the buddha, or any enlightened being for that matter.

That's the view of Dzogchen, a Tibetan word that means "Great Perfection." Dzogchen is treasured above all other practices in the Nyingma school of Vajrayana Buddhism because it helps us connect directly with our own enlightened nature.

Your essence, and the essence of every living creature, is pure, whole, and complete. There's nothing missing, and that's why we call it the Great Perfection. YOU are the Great Perfection. Don't

forget that. Dzogchen is talking about you. This Great Perfection is you right now, right here in this moment, not some fully developed you after you do a lot more meditation.

In Dzogchen, we call this enlightened nature rigpa, or pure awareness. Unlike some approaches in which buddhanature is taught in a more theoretical way, and you need to study and meditate for a long time to figure out what it is, Dzogchen is experiential. You get introduced to pure awareness directly, right on the spot. A traditional way to describe Dzogchen is in terms of the ground, the path, and the fruition.

The Great Perfection is our true nature, whether we realize it or not. That's the ground of Dzogchen. It's the reality of our experience and who we are.

But that doesn't help if we don't experience it for ourselves. The way to do that is by having this pure awareness introduced to us, and then getting familiar with it until it becomes stable and enduring. That process is the path.

Then, once we're familiar with our own true nature, once we've realized it fully and integrated it into every aspect of our lives, we will fully manifest the enlightened qualities that were there all along. That's the fruition.

The Ground of Dzogchen

It might be a little unclear what this "true nature" really is, so let me explain a bit more about the ground.

When we use all these fancy terms like "buddhanature" and "pure awareness," what are we actually talking about? Well, there are three main qualities to look for here. We refer to these as the "empty essence," "luminous nature," and "all-pervasive compassion." That's the ground, your true nature.
"Empty essence" means that the true nature of mind, the essence of pure awareness, transcends all our ideas, concepts, and beliefs. It is utterly beyond all our suffering and problems. It is completely free. The term for this is "innate purity"—the essence of who we are was, is, and always will be perfect. It's completely pure, and nothing can change that.

This empty essence is ungraspable, beyond our ordinary way of seeing things, but it's not nothing. There is also a luminous, knowing presence. This is what we call the "luminous nature." Sometimes it's called "self-clarity," because this clarity is spontaneous and natural. It's just there, all the time. Even when we're asleep, distracted, or completely neurotic. It's there.

The empty essence and clear nature are one and the same. They're inseparable. This inseparability is the third quality of the ground, which we call "all-pervasive compassion." This open,

spacious clarity manifests as all our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, just like the sun radiates light. These experiences, in fact all of our experiences, are none other than the manifestations or play of pure awareness.

The Path of Dzogchen

But what good does just knowing this do us? Not much. That's why we need a path. We need to translate this from nice words and ideas to an actual experience.
The Dzogchen path is really quite simple. That's not to say it's easy, but it is simple.

The only thing we need to do is to recognize this pure inner nature. We need to experience it for ourselves. That's it. If we want to make it a little more complicated, we could say that first we need to have pure awareness introduced to us, and then we become familiar with it.

So, how does that happen?

This is where a teacher becomes important. There's a lot going on in our minds. We have all sorts of memories and reactions, emotions and expectations. In short, we have monkey mind.

Seeing the subtle quality of empty clarity in the midst of all this mental activity isn't easy. If it were, we would have recognized rigpa a long time ago! But a skilled teacher who has recognized pure awareness in him or herself, and who holds an authentic lineage, can point it out to us. They can help us find our way through all the complexities of the mind to see this simple, ever present reality.

You might think that because you are already perfect, because this awakened nature is fully present as the very nature of your mind, then you don't need to meditate or practice. Nothing could be further from the truth. The trick is how you practice. You still need to meditate, but meditate effortlessly. You still need to practice, but practice naturalness.

Rather than practicing with the notion that there's some level to achieve beyond where you are right now, the main practice is learning to trust that this original purity is always present, especially when it feels like it isn't. Every step you take on the path should reinforce your trust that pure awareness is right here, right now. Until your recognition is unshakeable, you still need to do formal practice.

The Fruition of Dzogchen

As I said, the core of the path is simply recognizing the nature of mind and coming back to that recognition again and again, until it's as familiar as an old friend. If you do that, there will come a time when you've experienced this pure awareness so thoroughly and completely that you never lose touch with it. When you're meditating, you're meditating in pure awareness. When you're eating, you're eating in pure awareness. Even when you're sleeping, you're still resting in the recognition of pure awareness. That's what we call "full realization," the fruition of the path. At this point, all the qualities of the ground, your true enlightened nature, become manifest. These were there all along, but because you didn't know they were, it was almost as though they didn't exist. But now you know them. You know them thoroughly and completely. Perfect wisdom, boundless compassion, the spontaneous capacity to benefit others—all of these manifest.

This fruition is simply the full expression of your true nature. It's as though you go out and travel the whole world, looking and searching high and low for some peace of mind. But in the end, you come home and realize that everything you were looking for was right where you started. That's the Great Perfection.

Practice: Dzogchen

The trickiest part of Dzogchen practice is that it is not something we can do. The whole point is that we are learning to recognize what is already there, while our "doing" impulse is based on the assumption that who and what we are in the present moment needs improvement. So how do we put this into practice? Dzogchen meditation involves three important qualities: effortlessness, presence, and naturalness. In traditional terms, these three are called non-meditation, non-distraction, and non-fabrication.

To connect with effortlessness, we shift from a mode of "doing" to one of "being." We let go of the impulse to fiddle with the knobs of experience and give ourselves permission to simply be. We rest in effortless awareness.

But while we rest in effortless awareness, we are not lost or distracted. We are fully present, alert and aware. This presence is the second quality. It's not something we need to make happen. It's already here, with us all the time. When we drop the effort and simply rest, we're giving ourselves the opportunity to recognize the open clarity of awareness, to be this open clarity.

Nothing can diminish this effortless awareness. All our thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and impulses arise from this knowing presence, and dissolve back into it. For this reason, we do not

need to create any special state of mind to experience the mind's innate purity. We don't need to block our thoughts and emotions or control the movements of our attention. Just be as you are. This is the third quality—naturalness. We let everything unfold without trying to correct, alter, or improve anything.

As we grow more comfortable with resting in awareness, these qualities of effortlessness, presence, and naturalness will emerge, and we will slowly come to see that this spacious awareness is who we truly are.

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How to Do Mahamudra Meditation

In Buddhism, wisdom is not something we acquire or develop — it is who we really are, the true nature of mind. Through Mahamudra meditation, says Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, we relax into the emptiness, clarity, and awareness of ever-present buddha wisdom.

Buddhism is rich in methods for working with the mind. One of the most renowned and powerful is the ancient wisdom tradition known as Mahamudra. Originating in India, the view and practice of Mahamudra gradually spread across Asia and today has reached the West. As a philosophy, it aims to communicate clear knowledge of the true nature of the mind. As a meditation practice, it is designed to bring about that experience swiftly and unmistakably.

Mahamudra is a contemplative Buddhist tradition known for its simplicity. The practice is to be genuine, relaxed, and aware in every situation in life, to accept and appreciate who we are. To engage in its profound methods, we aren't required to change our lifestyle, and any message contrary to that is not a true

Mahamudra teaching. The practice of Mahamudra is an experience of our mind that's completely free and joyful, no matter what our life brings us. It points us to mind's true nature.

The meaning of Mahamudra is found in its name. Maha means "great" and mudra means "symbol" or "seal." The Great Symbol referred to is the wisdom of emptiness, which is the very nature of our mind and of all phenomena—any object or idea the mind can observe or become aware of. Because it covers the totality of our experience, the Great Symbol is known as the all-encompassing reality from which there is no escape or exception.

So, how do we begin the practice of Mahamudra? First, we learn with an open and interested mind what Mahamudra is. Then we reflect on and personalize that knowledge so that it becomes our own experience, rather than a theory. Then, having digested the meaning, we simply sit, going beyond knowing about Mahamudra to becoming one with it.

Realizing the true nature of our mind doesn't happen just by accident, pure luck, or willpower alone. We need some help. We have to rely on key instructions of the Mahamudra lineage imparted to us through a trusted and realized teacher. Mahamudra has a tradition of skillful methods for directly pointing out the nature of mind, which is a unique feature of this lineage. If we have the

opportunity to receive these instructions and a sincere interest in working with them, we have a good chance of understanding and realizing Mahamudra wisdom.

Mahamudra is divided into three parts: ground Mahamudra, path Mahamudra, and fruition Mahamudra. Ground Mahamudra is where our discussion starts. It is fundamentally a view of the most basic reality of our mind and world. We will then look briefly at path Mahamudra, which is the actual meditation practice. Last, we have fruition Mahamudra, a description of what the path leads us to. That will give us a complete picture of the Mahamudra journey of awakening.

Mahamudra teaches us with a number of special techniques for looking at our mind to see its true nature. When we look inside with a clear, steady focus, the mind we see is transparent, spacious, and open. It feels like something's there, but when we look for it, there's no "thing" we can find. Our thoughts and emotions are vivid, yet we can't put our hands on them. They melt away as soon as we notice them. Even sights and sounds, which seem to be real, distinct entities, evade our grasp when we search for their true identity. When we recognize the flowing, open, and spacious quality of all our experiences, even for a moment, that's the emptiness side of the wisdom of emptiness.

When we look at our mind, however, we see that it's not just spacious. There's a luminous, clear, and creative energy that's the source of our compassion and joy. There is also a quality of wakefulness, of all-encompassing awareness. This is the wisdom side of the wisdom of emptiness.

When we recognize the union of this brilliance, this awareness, and the open, transparent space, that's what we call the recognition of the wisdom of emptiness, or the true nature of mind. In such a moment, we don't experience just one side of our mind; we experience the wholeness of the mind. We see the union of space, compassion, and awareness, which is called Mahamudra.

This is a way of understanding the mind of enlightenment—buddha wisdom or buddhanature. This wisdom mind is rich in qualities that bring us boundless happiness, insight, and a corresponding desire to help our world. Right from the very beginning the minds of all beings have been free of any inherent faults or defects. We might ask, "What is this 'very beginning' that we are talking about? Twenty years ago? A billion years ago?"

Actually, it's this very moment, now, when we fail to recognize the true nature of mind. This is the very beginning. If we can relax in this moment, we are resting in the ground or fundamental state of Mahamudra. The way we rest is through the practice of meditation, which is path Mahamudra. When we can rest well, we are

naturally in union with the goal, or fruition, of the path. There's no other Mahamudra to attain: we are buddha, awake and free, in this very moment.

But when we fail to recognize the basic nature of our mind, then we have a problem. The luminous, creative energy of original mind is misperceived as the dualistic world of self and other. Confusion arises, clinging begins, and then the whole world of suffering and bewilderment manifests. Instead of enjoying peace, illumination, and happiness, we experience our mind as afflicted with painful emotions. We're bombarded by thoughts that lead us this way and that. We endure anxiety and fear while we long for peace and contentment.

That is what we call the spinning of samsara, or cyclic existence, which is endless until we decide to stop it by realizing mind's true state. So the beginning of samsara is when we fail to recognize that ground, and the end of samsara is nothing more complicated than recognizing our own nature of mind. When mind recognizes itself and can rest freely and relaxed in a state of openness, that is the end of our confusion and suffering.

Luminosity, the clarity nature of mind, manifests creatively as phenomena. Because we are habituated to solidifying our experience of this luminous display, it's easier for most of us to see the luminous aspect of mind than to recognize mind's empty nature.

However, if we're missing the experience of emptiness, we might start to think of luminosity as something that's solid and real enough to hold onto. Then it becomes a source of suffering and confusion instead of freedom. It's important to first learn what emptiness actually means, at least intellectually, before we jump to the conclusion that the nature of mind possesses all the qualities of enlightenment. Once we have a good understanding of the emptiness nature of mind, then we can further that view by seeing mind's luminous nature.

So before undertaking Mahamudra meditation, we should first have a theoretical understanding of the true nature of mind—as empty, luminous, and aware. Second, we should understand how confusion develops when we don't recognize that nature. Third, we should understand that the essence of our confused thoughts and emotions is free of any innate negativity or fixation, that all expressions and experiences of mind are empty and luminous. These three aspects of ground Mahamudra are important to understand through conceptual mind first, and then through the process of reflection to make it more experiential. Finally, we bring our understanding to complete realization through meditation.

In the beginning, Mahamudra meditation is a process of becoming familiar with our mind just as it is, and then learning how to relax within it. Our first glimpse is likely to show us that our mind

often wanders aimlessly about, and there's little organization to our thinking. It's like a house with junk piled up everywhere. So, what do we need to do first? We need to bring a sense of order and clarity to our mind. By being more mindful of our thought process, our awareness naturally becomes sharper, more precise, and more discriminating. Once we've created some mental space, we can begin to glimpse mind's nature and the play of its creative energy. Gradually, we can further let go of the thoughts, labels, and judgments that keep our mind moving, unsettled, and tense. We can begin to relax, expand, and inhabit a new dimension of presence and openness.

There are two main types of meditation in the Mahamudra tradition: Mahamudra shamatha, or resting in the nature of mind, and Mahamudra vipashyana, or clear seeing. The focus of our attention is the mind itself, as opposed to anything external. If you have a background of sitting meditation and are familiar with that practice, then learning to rest in the nature of mind can be very simple, easy, and straightforward.

What does it mean to rest in the nature of mind, and how do we do it? We may think that to meditate, we have to concentrate, we have to focus on something. The actual meditation of Mahamudra is not really about that. It's more about knowing how to rest our mind and let it relax in its own state. That can be tricky, because on one hand we need to be mindful and stay present, and on the

other, we need to let go of any stress and just relax. So the best practice is the middle way, finding a balance between nondistraction and relaxation.

In the beginning, that may feel artificial, but if we keep doing it, it becomes effortless. It's like when we start learning how to drive a car. It's very stressful when we first get behind the wheel. Our eyes are glued to the road. We're holding onto the steering wheel so tightly we can feel the tension in our shoulders. At first it's an intense, scary experience, but the more we learn about driving, the more we relax.

In the same way, Mahamudra meditation can feel unnatural and stressful at first. We may be worried that we have too many thoughts and are not relaxed enough, or that our focus is not in the right place. But relaxation will come naturally if we keep doing it. That's the key thing—to keep doing it. Then the experience of space, awareness, and relaxation will come naturally.

Meditation: Mahamudra

First, take your seat on a cushion or chair in an upright and relaxed position. Take a moment to feel the cushion, the posture of your body, the attitude of the mind, and the movement of the breath. Sit quietly for several minutes, gently letting go of your thoughts until you feel a sense of calmness.

Next, bring awareness to the eyes and look directly into the space in front. Then simply relax at ease and rest in the present moment, in nowness. On one hand, there's a sense of focusing on the space, but on the other, there's no particular spot to focus on. The gaze is like space itself, wide and spacious.

Whatever comes up in the present, whether it's a thought, emotion, or perception, try to meet it without judgment or comment. Rest the mind in that very experience, whether you regard it as good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant. There's no need to change or improve it or look for a better place to rest. Rest the mind where it is and just as it is.

In Mahamudra meditation, it isn't sufficient just to recognize the presence of thoughts and emotions; we need to recognize their true nature and rest within that experience. So from time to time in meditation, reflect on the three basic characteristics of mind: emptiness, clarity, and awareness.

The emptiness of the mind is something we can "see," so to speak. When we look at the mind, it's like infinite space. It has no limit. It has no material form, color, or shape. There is nothing we can touch. That space, that openness, is the empty nature of our mind.

When contemplating mind's emptiness, experience the spacious, insubstantial, nonmaterial quality of mind, of thoughts and emotions, and leave the mind in a state of ease and total openness. This mind is not just empty, however. It also has a vivid clarity, an infinite and vast luminosity, which is the radiance of emptiness itself. It's like a wide, clear sky filled with light. This experience of space with light is the experience of great compassion and lovingkindness, or unbiased great love beyond concept. It manifests in the vibrant energy of our thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. We can see it in every experience of mind, especially in the powerful display of our emotions.

Once again, sit quietly until you feel a sense of calmness. Then contemplate the clarity aspect of mind. Look directly at whatever forms, thoughts, or emotions arise: all are the natural expression of this luminous nature. Look beyond the object and experience the radiance of emptiness, resting relaxed within that basic presence of clarity.

The clarity aspect of mind has the power of knowing, seeing, and experiencing the world. When a room is full of light, we can see all the objects surrounding us. In the same way, the light of our mind makes appearances clear and distinct. When we think about an object, our mind naturally produces an image for it. Whether

we're thinking about Bart Simpson or His Holiness the Karmapa, the image we see is an expression of mind's clear, playful, creative energy.

Mind is not only empty and clear; it has the quality of panoramic and discriminating awareness. While clarity is the compassion aspect of mind, awareness is the wakeful aspect. It is the sharp, penetrating intelligence (prajna) that sees through any confusion and perfectly understands the world it sees. With clarity and awareness coming together, we experience the full power and benefit of compassion and wisdom in our lives.

As before, now rest the mind for a few moments. Let go of any thoughts of hope or fear, and calm the mind. Rest the gaze in the open space in front. Bring our mind into the present moment and relax, simply experiencing the quality of awareness. Then let go of even that and relax without any thought. Again, we bring ourselves back into the present moment of awareness. Relax at ease and experience the mind as empty and luminous.

With awareness, we experience the three aspects of mind in union and the wholeness of mind's nature. When we hear instructions to meditate on the mind or to rest in mind's true nature, it is this union of emptiness, clarity, and awareness. When we are able to

rest in this nature without too much stress from trying too hard to focus or concentrate, we can begin to experience genuine relaxation.

Relaxing in this space is one of the most powerful meditations leading to a direct experience of buddha mind. With this experience, we can bring a new level of understanding and skill into our everyday life. The wisdom and compassion we manifest will transform the once disturbing energies of our thoughts and emotions into something very useful and powerful that can bring about the experience of enlightenment.

Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche is founder and president of Nalandabodhi and Nitartha International, and the author of several books including, most recently, *Emotional Rescue: How to Work with Your Emotions to Transform Hurt and Confusion into Energy That Empowers You.*

Buddhist Teachings on Mindfulness Meditation

What is mindfulness meditation and how do you do it? Below you'll find the basics about the practice and its Buddhist roots, plus easy-to-follow instructions and additional reading.

What is mindfulness?

Some might primarily think of it as a state of mind; others, as a practice. In either case, mindfulness is about cultivating, as the Buddhist teacher Joseph Goldstein has written, "the quality and power of mind that is aware of what is happening, without judgement and without interference."

That doesn't necessarily sound "Buddhist." Is it?

You're right; that description of mindfulness would be quite recognizable to anyone who practices secular mindfulness (that is, mindfulness that is not necessarily practiced in a religious or spiritual context). And indeed, mindfulness is not the exclusive territory of Buddhism. Mindfulness is, however, a specialty of

Buddhism. As Goldstein also notes, the Buddha himself referred to it as "the path to enlightenment." And so in the 2,600 years since then, many who've followed in the Buddha's footsteps have upheld, skillfully restated, or even innovated upon his mindfulness teachings in to order guide those who would like to live in accord with Buddhist principles.

Do all Buddhists do "mindfulness practice"?

Many Buddhists do specifically undertake practices meant to cultivate mindfulness. Others may not, but it's fair to say that the lion's share of Buddhist practices help produce in us a greater sense of awareness and connection to the people and world around us. The very name "Buddha," after all, means "Awakened One." So you'll find that while there's an emphasis on mindfulness in among people who practice Vipassana or Insight meditation as taught in the foundational Theravada school of Buddhism, there are corollaries found in other Buddhist schools like Zen and Vajrayana.

What are the "Four Foundations of Mindfulness"?

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness, as taught by the historical Buddha and ever since, are key things that we should practice being mindful of. These are: our bodies, our feelings, our minds

themselves, and phenomena / the world around us. By training in mindfulness of these four foundations, we see, more and more, how all of these things really are, outside from our conceptual ideas of them. Training in the four foundations of mindfulness is training in seeing reality with more clarity and equanimity. Can you say more about how training in mindfulness relate to what Buddhism teaches?

We suffer, according to Buddhism, not because there's anything inherently wrong with us but simply because we misunderstand the nature of reality. Buddhist practice helps us come to terms with reality by cultivating our awareness of the "three characteristics of experience," also known as "the three marks of existence." These are: impermanence, suffering, and insight—words that will likely be familiar to anyone who's read about Buddhism more than a little. Contemplating them, Thich Nhat Hanh has said, "can help liberate us from fear and suffering. Living mindfully and with concentration, we see a deeper reality and are able to witness impermanence without fear, anger, or despair." For more on the three marks, read Sylvia Boorstein's Lion's Roar teaching, "I Want to Be Insightful."

How can I get started? What are the basic mindfulness meditation instructions?

There's much that can be said about mindfulness practice, but the basic idea is quite simple. (One teacher has, playfully, boiled the practice down to "Sit Down, Shut Up, and Pay Attention.") You can see for yourself how simple it is by trying it.

TRY THIS SIMPLE MINDFULNESS MEDITATION:

Choose a quiet and uplifted place to do your meditation practice. Sit cross-legged on a meditation cushion, or if that's difficult, sit on a straight-backed chair with your feet flat on the floor, without leaning against the back of the chair.

Place your hands palms-down on your thighs and take an upright posture with a straight back, relaxed yet dignified. With your eyes open, let your gaze rest comfortably as you look slightly downward about six feet in front of you.

Place your attention lightly on your out-breath, while remaining aware of the environment around you. Be with each breath as the air goes out through your mouth and nostrils and dissolves into the space around you. At the end of each out-breath, simply rest until the next breath goes out. For a more focused meditation, you can follow both the out-breaths and in-breaths.

Whenever you notice that a thought has taken your attention away from the breath, just say to yourself, "thinking," and return to following the breath. In this context, any thought, feeling, or perception that distracts you is labeled "thinking." Thoughts are not judged as good or bad. When a thought arises, just gently note it and return your attention to your breath and posture.

At the end of your meditation session, bring calm, mindfulness, and openness into the rest of your day.

Want more guidance? "How to Practice Mindfulness Meditation" reiterates and expands upon the five steps you see here.

Can anyone do mindfulness meditation?

Pretty much. If you can follow (or easily adapt) the instructions above, you can do mindfulness meditation. It's so simple that, as meditation teacher Ofoso Jones-Quartey (above) writes in Lion's Roar, he's been teaching it to young people for years, including people as young as age two!

Lion's Roar is the website of *Lion's Roar* magazine (formerly the *Shambhala Sun*) and *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly*, with exclusive Buddhist news, teachings, art, and commentary. Sign up for the Lion's Roar weekly newsletter and follow Lion's Roar on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest.

Thich Nhat Hanh on Walking Meditation

The practice of mindful walking, says Thich Nhat Hanh, is a profound and pleasurable way to deepen our connection with our body and the earth. We breathe, take a mindful step, and come back to our true home. Read on and learn how.

Many of us walk for the sole purpose of getting from one place to another. Now suppose we are walking to a sacred place. We would walk quietly and take each gentle step with reverence. I propose that we walk this way every time we walk on the earth. The earth is sacred and we touch her with each step. We should be very respectful, because we are walking on our mother. If we walk like that, then every step will be grounding, every step will be nourishing.

We can train ourselves to walk with reverence. Wherever we walk, whether it's the railway station or the supermarket, we are walking on the earth and so we are in a holy sanctuary. If we remember to walk like that, we can be nourished and find solidity with each step.

To walk in this way, we have to notice each step. Each step made in mindfulness can bring us back to the here and the now. Go slowly. Mindfulness lights our way. We don't rush. With each breath we may take just one step. We may have run all our life, but now we don't have to run anymore. This is the time to stop running. To be grounded in the earth is to feel its solidity with each step and know that we are right where we are supposed to be.

Each mindful breath, each mindful step, reminds us that we are alive on this beautiful planet. We don't need anything else. It is wonderful enough just to be alive, to breathe in, and to make one step. We have arrived at where real life is available—the present moment. If we breathe and walk in this way, we become as solid as a mountain.

There are those of us who have a comfortable house, but we don't feel that we are at home. We don't want for anything, and yet we don't feel at home. All of us are looking for our solid ground, our true home. The earth is our true home and it is always there, beneath us and around us. Breathe, take a mindful step, and arrive. We are already at home.

Uniting Body and Mind

We can't be grounded in our body if our mind is somewhere else. We each have a body that has been given us by the earth. This body is a wonder. In our daily lives, we may spend many hours forgetting the body. We get lost in our computer or in our worries, fear, or busyness. Walking meditation makes us whole again. Only when we are connected with our body are we truly alive. Healing is not possible without that connection. So walk and breathe in such a way that you can connect with your body deeply.

Walking meditation unites our body and our mind. We combine our breathing with our steps. When we breathe in, we may take two or three steps. When we breathe out, we may take three, four, or five steps. We pay attention to what is comfortable for our body.

Our breathing has the function of helping our body and mind to calm down. As we walk, we can say, Breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I bring peace into my body. Calming the breath calms the body and reduces any pain and tension.

When we walk like this, with our breath, we bring our body and our mind back together. Our body and our mind are two aspects of the same reality. If we remove our mind from our body, our body is dead. If we take our body out of our mind, our mind is dead. Don't think that one can be if the other is not.

Walking meditation is first and foremost a practice to bring body and mind together peacefully. No matter what we do, the place to start is to calm down, because when our mind and our body have calmed down, we see more clearly. When we see our anger or sadness clearly, it dissipates. We begin to feel more compassion for ourselves and others. We can only feel this when body and mind are united.

Walking meditation should not be work. It is very pleasant, especially in the early morning when the air is still very fresh. When we walk mindfully, we see the beauty and the wonder of the earth around us, and we wake up. We see that we are living a very wonderful moment. If our mind is caught and preoccupied with our worries and suffering, we miss these things. We can value each step we take, and each step brings us happiness. When we look again at the earth and the sky, we see that the earth is a wonderful reality.

We Are Not Separate From the Earth

We think that the earth is the earth and we are something outside of the earth. But in fact we are inside of the earth. Imagine that the earth is the tree and we are a leaf. The earth is not the environment, something outside of us that we need to care for.

The earth is us. Just as your parents, ancestors, and teachers are inside you, the earth is in you. Taking care of the earth, we take care of ourselves.

When we see that the earth is not just the environment, that the earth is in us, at that moment you can have real communion with the earth. But if we see the earth as only the environment, with ourselves in the center, then we only want to do something for the earth in order for us to survive. But that is not enough. That is a dualistic way of seeing.

We have to practice looking at our planet not just as matter, but as a living and sentient being. The universe, the sun, and the stars have contributed many elements to the earth, and when we look into the earth we see that it's a very beautiful flower containing the presence of the whole universe. When we look into our own bodily formation, we are made of the same elements as the planet. It has made us. The earth and the universe are inside of us.

When we take mindful steps on the earth, our body and mind unite, and we unite with the earth. The earth gave birth to us and the earth will receive us again. Nothing is lost. Nothing is born. Nothing dies. We don't need to wait until after our body has disintegrated to go back to Mother Earth. We are going back to Mother

Earth at every moment. Whenever we breathe, whenever we step, we are returning to the earth. Even when we scratch ourselves, skin cells will fall and return to the earth.

Earth includes the life sphere and the atmosphere. So you don't have to wait until you die to go back to Mother Earth, because you are already in Mother Earth. We have to return to take refuge in our beautiful planet. I know that earth is my home. I don't need to die in order to go back to Mother Earth. I am in Mother Earth right now, and Mother Earth is in me.

You may like to try this exercise while you walk: Breathing in, I know Mother Earth is in me. Breathing out, I know Mother Earth is in me.

Paul Tillich, the German theologian, said, "God is not a person but not less than a person." This is true of the earth as well. It is more than a person. It has given birth to millions of species, including human beings. Many ancient cultures believed there was a deity that inhabited the sun, and they worshiped the sun. But when I do walking meditation and touching the earth, I do not have that kind of dualistic view. I am not worshiping the earth as a separate deity outside of myself.

I think of the earth as a bodhisattva, a great and compassionate being. A bodhisattva is a being who has awakening, understanding, and love. Any living being who has awakening, peace,

understanding, and love can be called a bodhisattva, but a bodhisattva doesn't have to be a human being. When we look into a tree, we see the tree is fresh, it nourishes life, and it offers shade and beauty. It's a place of refuge for so many birds and other creatures. A bodhisattva is not something that is up in the clouds far away from us. Bodhisattvas are all around us. A young person who has love, who has freshness, who has understanding, who offers us a lot of happiness, is a bodhisattva. The pine standing in the garden gives us joy, offers us oxygen, and makes life more beautiful.

When we say that earth is a beautiful bodhisattva, this is not our imagination. It is a fact that the earth is giving life and she is very beautiful. The bodhisattva is not a separate spirit inhabiting the earth; we should transcend that idea. There are not two separate things—the earth, which is a material thing, and the spirit of the earth, a nonmaterial thing that inhabits the earth.

Our planet earth is itself a true, great bodhisattva. It embodies so many great virtues. The earth is solid—it can carry so many things. It is patient—it takes its time moving glaciers and carving rocks. The earth doesn't discriminate. We can throw fragrant flowers on the earth, or we can throw urine and excrement on the earth, and the earth purifies it. The earth has a great capacity to endure, and it offers so much to nourish us—water, shelter, food, and air to breathe.

When we recognize the virtues, the talent, the beauty of the earth bodhisattva, love is born. You love the earth and the earth loves you. You would do anything for the well-being of the earth. And the earth will do anything for your well-being. That is the natural outcome of the real loving relationship. The earth is not just your environment, to be taken care of or worshiped; you are each other. Every mindful step can manifest that love.

Part of love is responsibility. In Buddhism, we speak of meditation as an act of awakening. To awaken is to be awake to something. We need to be awake to the fact that the earth is in danger and living species on earth are also in danger. When we walk mindfully, each step reminds us of our responsibility. We have to protect the earth with the same commitment we have to protect our family and ourselves. The earth can nourish and heal us but it suffers as well. With each step the earth heals us, and with each step we heal the earth.

When we walk mindfully on the face of the earth, we are grounded in her generosity and we cannot help but be grateful. All of the earth's qualities of patience, stability, creativity, love, and nondiscrimination are available to us when we walk reverently, aware of our connection.

Let the Buddha Walk

I have a student named Sister Tri Hai who spent a long time in prison. She was a peace activist I knew since she was in middle school. She came to the United States to study English literature before going back to Vietnam and becoming a nun. When she was out in the streets advocating for peaceful change, she was arrested and put in prison.

During the day, the prison guards didn't like her to sit in meditation. When they see someone sitting in a prison cell solidly and stably, it feels a bit threatening. So she waited until the lights had gone out, and she would sit like a person who has freedom. In outer appearance she was caught in the prison. But inside she was completely free. When you sit like that, the walls are not there. You're in touch with the whole universe. You have more freedom than people outside who are imprisoning themselves in their agitation.

Sister Tri Hai also practiced walking meditation in her prison cell. It was very small—after seven steps she had to turn around and come back. Sitting and walking mindfully gave her space inside. She taught other prisoners in her cell how to sit and how to breathe so they would suffer less. They were in a cold cell, but through their walking meditation, they were grounded in the solid beauty of the earth.

Those of us who can walk on the earth, who can walk in freedom, should do it. If we rush from one place to another, without practicing walking meditation, it is such a waste. What is walking for? Walking is for nothing. It's just for walking. That is our ultimate aim—walking in the spring breeze. We have to walk so that we have happiness, so that we can be a free person. We have to let go of everything, and not seek or long or search for anything. There is enough for us to be happy.

All the Buddhist stories tell us that the Buddha had a lot of happiness when he sat, when he walked, when he ate. We have some experience of this. We know there are moments when we're walking or sitting that we are so happy. We also know that there are times, because of illness or physical disability or because our mind is caught elsewhere, when we cannot walk freely like the Buddha. There are those of us who do not have the use of our legs. There are those of us who are in prison, like Sister Tri Hai, and only have a few feet of space. But we can all invite the Buddha to walk for us. When we have difficulty, we can leave that difficulty behind and let the Buddha walk for us. In a while the solidity of the earth can help us return to ourselves.

We are made of body and mind. Our body can radiate the energy of peace and compassion. Our mind also has energy. The energy of the mind can be powerful. If the energy of the mind is filled with fear and anger, it can be very destructive. But if we sit

mindfully, if we walk mindfully and reverently on the earth, we will generate the energies of mindfulness, of peace, and of compassion in both body and mind. This kind of energy can heal and transform.

If you walk reverently on the earth with two other people, soaking in the earth's solidity, you will all three radiate and benefit from the energy of peace and compassion. If three hundred people sit or walk like this, each one generates the energy of mindfulness, peace, and compassion, and everyone in the group receives that healing energy. The energy of peace and mindfulness does not come from elsewhere. It comes from us. It comes from our capacity to breathe, to walk, to sit mindfully and recognize the wonders of life.

When you walk reverently and solidly on this earth and I do the same, we send out waves of compassion and peace. It is this compassion that will heal ourselves, each other, and this beautiful green earth.

Meditation: Walking on the Earth

Walk slowly, in a relaxed way. When you practice this way, your steps are those of the most secure person on earth. Feel the gravity that makes every step attach to the earth. With each step, you are grounded on the earth.

One way to practice walking meditation is to breathe in and take one step, and focus all your attention on the sole of your foot. If you have not arrived fully, 100 percent in the here and the now, don't take the next step. I'm sure you can take a step like that because there is buddhanature in you. Buddhanature is the capacity of being aware of what is going on. It is what allows you to recognize what you are doing in the current moment and to say to yourself, I am alive, I am taking a step. Anyone can do this. There is a buddha in every one of us, and we should allow the buddha to walk.

While walking, practice conscious breathing by counting steps. Notice each breath and the number of steps you take as you breathe in and as you breathe out. Don't try to control your breathing. Allow your lungs as much time and air as they need, and simply notice how many steps you take as your lungs fill up and how many you take as they empty, mindful of both your breath and your steps. The link is the counting.

When you walk uphill or downhill, the number of steps per breath will change. Always follow the needs of your lungs. You may notice that your exhalation is longer than your inhalation. You might find that you take three steps during your in-breath and four steps during your out-breath, or two steps, then three steps. If this is comfortable for you, please enjoy practicing this way. You can also

try making the in-breath and the out-breath the same length, so that you take three steps with your in-breath and three with your out-breath. Keep walking and you will find the natural connection between your breath and your steps.

Don't forget to practice smiling. Your half-smile will bring calm and delight to your steps and your breath, and help sustain your attention. After practicing for half an hour or an hour, you will find that your breath, your steps, your counting, and your half-smile all blend together in a marvelous balance of mindfulness. Each step grounds us in the solidity of the earth. With each step we fully arrive in the present moment.

Walking Meditation Poem

I take refuge in Mother Earth.
Every breath, every step
manifests our love.
Every breath brings happiness.
Every step brings happiness.
I see the whole cosmos in the earth.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022) was a renowned Zen teacher and poet, the founder of the Engaged Buddhist movement, and the founder of nine monastic communities, including Plum Village Monastery in France. He was also the author of At Home in the World, The Other Shore, and more than a hundred other books that have sold millions of copies worldwide.

How to Practice Loving-Kindness

JoAnna Hardy teaches us the famed Buddhist practice of metta – offering love to ourselves and others.

When I was introduced to the practice of metta—most often translated as lovingkindness practice—I definitely knew it wasn't for me. It was too mushy and sentimental for my pragmatic mind. It was reminiscent of the wishful praying that I thought was reserved for the type of faith I had left behind.

I didn't really believe that I—or maybe any living being—could possibly find the happiness, safety, ease, and freedom being offered through metta practice. Maybe we didn't even deserve it! When I put my hand on my heart, as we are often asked to do during this practice, I felt numb and disconnected. I thought of loving-kindness as an unnecessary additive to the more important four foundations of mindfulness. I ignored the practice for many years.

Then, a wise and insightful teacher saw me struggling and assigned metta as my daily practice for three months. It wasn't because my teacher thought I was not a kind and loving person—I am—but I needed a way to love all beings, and to offer that love to myself too.

I discovered that while loving-kindness is taught in many ways by different teachers, ultimately it is an equalizer and an antidote to hatred and aversion. It is a state that can be developed through practices that help us cultivate the unconditional, expansive qualities of the heart. Metta is the great balancer to insight and mindfulness practices.

When I discovered other translations of the word metta, like care, friendliness, goodwill, and benevolence, the practice began to feel more accessible and less lofty. Metta felt like something I could touch and cultivate daily. The great balancer began to do its work. My doubt began to melt.

In trying times such as these, it seems difficult to imagine that we could soften our hearts and find love amid all of the suffering we hear about daily. Yet, the prescription of the Buddha is that even in the darkest of places and times, our heart-mind has the capacity to be free from the burdens of hatred.

Here is a four-step instruction for metta. These steps are for practicing loving-kindness for yourself. You can also practice metta for others in different categories, such as people close to you, friends, people you are neutral toward, people you find difficult, and ultimately all living beings.

Initially, set aside 15-20 minutes to do the four steps. As you develop your practice, you can add more time as you wish. Setting a timer is helpful.

1. Put your body at ease.

Find a physically comfortable space. Sitting in a comfortable chair or lying down is helpful. If you feel at ease on a meditation cushion, that is fine too. The idea is to find a posture that allows the body to be in as much ease as possible. Allow yourself to feel held and supported by whatever you're sitting or lying on. Closing the eyes can help to facilitate ease. If that's not comfortable, then allow the eyes to be open and gazing softly at a singular point.

2. Soften the belly and chest.

Intentionally soften the belly to start. Feel the expansion and contraction as each breath fills the belly and chest area. Allow your breathing to facilitate space in your belly and chest area. Take your time; there's no rush. If you feel tension, that's okay.

3. Recall feelings of love and kindness.

Focus on the heart area. Placing your hand on your heart can add to this step. See if you can recall feelings of care, kindness, and friendliness. Let them permeate your heart area. Stay with this while moving into the next step. If the feelings seem inaccessible or difficult right now, stay with the spaciousness and breathing into the belly and chest areas.

4. Do the recitation.

Reciting phrases is a classic way of practicing metta. Whether we believe the phrases in the moment or not, it's still useful to say them; they give the heart and mind something to land on and to aspire to. You can express them in any way you want, with these basic sentiments in mind. Repeat these phrases for the length of your practice period:

May I be safe
May I be healthy
May I be happy
May I be at ease
May I be filled with loving-kindness
May I be peaceful

In metta practice, it is normal for the doubting mind to pop up and challenge the notion of loving ourselves and others. Don't let this doubt stop you. It is important to know that metta is not a practice of perfection, but one of cultivation. This is our practice—freeing our heart and mind from the clutches of fear, hatred, and confusion, regardless of what is happening in the world around us. I am happy to report, after trying it myself, that this skeptic is now convinced!

JoAnna Hardy practices in the Theravada Insight tradition, with a focus on teaching meditation in communities dedicated to seeing the truth of how racism, gender inequality, and oppression go hand in hand with the compassionate-action teachings in Buddhism. She is leader of the Lion's Roar Online Learning course, How to Cultivate a Loving Heart: The Buddhist Practice of Metta.

Meditation: Sit Down, Shut Up, and Pay Attention

All enlightened qualities start with a mind that is stable, open, and awake. It all begins, says James Ishmael Ford, with the simple practice of sitting down, shutting up, and paying attention.

Perhaps you're stressed. No doubt this is the age of stress. Fortunately, there are many things you can do about it. Among them, a number of styles of meditation will help to slow things down, give you a bit of space, a moment of calm in the storm. There sure seem to be a lot of storms that need calming. So it's natural that many are turning to meditation as a significant help toward mental and physical well-being.

Of course that's not the only reason people turn to meditation. Nor is it even the most important. Perhaps you've experienced some spiritual question. Maybe you have a sense there's something missing in your life. Perhaps you've noticed that whether

things are going well or badly there always seems to be a hole. This longing for some sense of wholeness is what brings many to meditation.

Or maybe you're thinking that things are possibly not the way everyone seems to think they are. You've noticed discrepancies between what you've been told and what you actually see and hear and experience. And, with that, perhaps you have an intuition that meditation of one sort or another might point you toward a deeper, more accurate take on what really is.

What is interesting is how meditation can be so important for us, whether we're looking to enhance our well-being, hoping to get a bit of a better handle on our lives, or throwing our lot into the great exploration of this life's meaning and purpose.

Whatever the reason we take up meditation, what I've found is that when we stop and look, step away from our assumptions just for a moment, and take up the spiritual discipline of practice, things do happen. It can be shocking to discover how much is in our hands. William James observed, "Each of us literally chooses, by his way of attending to things, what sort of universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit." Synergies begin when we bring our attention to the ways of the world, and the ways of our hearts. We

discover new territory and new possibility. An old and dear friend summarized this, observing how the cultivation of a "peaceful mind can blossom into a profound mind."

Of course, there are many kinds of meditation, one or another for every purpose under the sun. Personally, I'm a bit of a minimalist. And so whatever your reason for considering meditation, maybe someone interested in minimums might be helpful to you. Here's what I have to offer: I find the practice of sitting down, shutting up, and paying attention is the most useful path to a more healthy life. It will help us find peace and sometimes open us up to ever deeper possibilities.

Sit down. Shut up. Pay attention. These are the points that allow the synergies to happen. As the modern Chinese master Sheng Yen said, "As the mind becomes clearer, it becomes more empty and calm, and as it becomes more empty and calm, it grows clearer." This is the spiral path of clarity. The more deeply we engage it, the deeper we become. It is here we find that peaceful mind. With this we find the place is set where we can find a profound mind, opening ourselves to a path of wisdom in a world of confusion.

Sit Down

When I first began Buddhist meditation I met a woman who was a longtime student of Zen, and who was considered to have achieved deep insight. What is important to note here is that she was a quadriplegic; since her accident she'd never "sat" in any traditional way. Whenever I talk with people about sitting, I remember her. In fact the Buddha told us there are four postures suitable to meditation: standing, walking, lying down and sitting down. They all work. They all have a place.

That said, for most of us it seems best to begin the practice by sitting down. Taking our place this way establishes our intention and allows us to focus on the basics of the practice.

When someone says something like, "I don't need to sit, my spiritual practice is golf" (or knitting, or archery, or target shooting), I think they might well be missing something. Now, I have nothing against golf, or any of these activities. While each of them brings gifts, true meditation—at least the meditation disciplines associated with Buddhism—bring us to something more important. And we start by taking our place, by sitting down.

Just sit. If you can hold your body upright it is better. You can sit on the floor on a pillow or on a chair. Whichever you chose, it helps to have your bottom a bit higher than your knees. This establishes a triangular base that supports your torso. Pushing

the small of the back slightly forward and holding the shoulders slightly back helps create that upright position. Sitting this way, you can immediately feel your lungs opening up and each breath invigorating your body.

Place your hands in your lap. In Zen, we like to sit with our eyes open. Many traditions prefer to close the eyes. Experiment a little. Find what seems to work best for you. Personally, I like to see where I'm going.

Shut Up

Maybe you've heard the story of the professor who visited the Zen master. The professor talks and talks and talks, until his throat is dry. Finally the master offers him some tea. The professor thanks the teacher, who then sets out two cups and begins to pour tea into the first cup, and pours and pours. The tea flows out of the cup and covers the table.

Most of the time when people hear this story they identify with the Zen master. We all know people like the professor, people who just don't know when to shut up. But the truth is that we're such people ourselves. That is you. That is me. It's a human thing. For the most part we are running a steady commentary on life.

We're judging, we're refining, we're planning, we're regretting. We tend to run tape loops around anger or resentment, around desire and wanting, around how we think things are or are supposed to be. What if we did just shut up?

In Japanese monasteries, a novice monk would have his place in the meditation hall pointed out to him and he'd just go sit there. Shutting up in the external sense would be obvious to him because in old Japanese monasteries if you got out of hand you could catch a beating. But as for handling those loops of noise inside the head, well, almost nothing is said about that.

The invitation here is not to put a complete stop to our thoughts, whether they're those old tape loops we run over and over, or more creative and possibly even useful thoughts. Truth is, stopping all thought is a biological impossibility. But we can slow it all down. We can stop our thoughts and feelings from grabbing us by the throat.

> Shutting up is the invitation.
> Just be quiet.
> Pay Attention

Pay Attention

But pay attention to what? Our minds can wander, and wildly. We plan and we regret; we wish for something else. We rarely are simply present. So, how to deal with it?

Here's a start. Take five breath cycles, putting a number on each inhalation and exhalation, counting one as you inhale, two as you exhale and so on to ten. The invitation here is to notice. When you don't notice—and realize you don't notice—return to one. Don't blame yourself. Just return to one. Don't blame something else. Return to one. Just notice. Just pay attention.

Or you allow your attention to ride on the natural breathing without counting.

Or you can just pay attention.

Many years ago there was an American who made his fortune doing business in East Asia. Financially comfortable, he decided to retire and to enjoy the fruits of his labors. Along the way he'd become fascinated with jade, and decided to learn all there was to know about it.

He hired the foremost authority on the subject, who instructed him to come to her home once a week for a tutorial. As he arrived on the first day, he was greeted and given some tea. Then the man

was handed a large piece of jade, and with that, the tutor disappeared for an hour. When the tutor returned she claimed the jade, thanked the patron for his time, and told him his next appointment was scheduled for the same time the following week. The man wasn't sure what to make of this experience, but he'd learned patience in his years in business, and deferred for the time being to the reputation of his tutor.

Sure enough, the same thing happened again the next week. This time the patron was less willing to defer, but he restrained himself, and came back for a third time. And then a fourth time. Each visit repeated itself exactly: some tea, some small talk, the piece of jade was put into his hand, and the tutor left for an hour.

Finally, after many weeks, he was once again handed the jade and the tutor departed. At the end of that hour he couldn't contain himself any longer. Everything that had been boiling within him burst forth when the tutor returned. "I have no idea what you think you're doing! But I'm no fool. You've just been wasting my time and my money. And now, to add insult to injury, this time you put a piece of fake jade into my hand." And he was right— it was fake.

Just pay attention.

Perhaps you're stressed. Perhaps you have some burning question about life and death. Perhaps you intuit there is something more to all this than you've been told.

Sit down. Shut up. Pay attention.
You never know when it will reveal what is true and what is fake.

James Ishmael Ford is a senior guiding teacher of Boundless Way Zen and the author of several books including Zen Master WHO? and If You're Lucky, Your Heart Will Break. He is the guiding teacher of Blue Cliff Zen.

Meditation Only Goes So Far

If you want to connect with the open, spacious quality of mind, says Willa Blythe Baker, at some point you have to stop trying to meditate.

One hot summer evening several years ago, I found myself listening to a teaching in a meditation hall in upstate New York, an activity that had become far too rare at that point in my life. A hush came over the crowd as the diminutive teacher entered the room and took his seat. “Do you want to know the secret to meditation?” he asked.

Vigorous nods answered his question. Who doesn’t like to be in on a secret?

“Okay,” he said, “but first we need to prepare to meditate. Get comfortable on your cushion. Straighten your back. Lower your gaze. Relax your shoulders. Take a few slow, deep breaths…” He demonstrated.

There was a shuffle around the room as people shifted, pushed cushions into place, straightened up, sighed deeply. After a minute or so, the fidgeting settled.

"Okay, now—" The teacher paused for effect. "Listen closely. I am going to share a secret with you." A palpable sense of anticipation settled over the room.

"Are you sure you're ready?" He was teasing us a little. Glancing up, I could see that he was smiling, enjoying our expectation.
"All right. The secret to meditation is—"
He paused again to heighten our anticipation.

"Don't meditate."
He drew out the word "don't" slowly.

After pausing again to let the instruction sink in, he added, "Instead, just be present, as you are, right here, right now. No grasping. Nothing more needs to be done."

I'm not sure what others in the room experienced, but for me there was a sudden shift. I felt myself falling into a space of being acutely, vividly, and simply aware.

Dropping the Meditation Project

The instruction to not meditate may sound a bit scandalous in the Buddhist context we inhabit, but it is in fact nothing new. The hermeneutic of nonmeditation has roots as far back as the tenth century and the Indian master Tilopa, the founder of the Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. He sings about non-meditation in his dohas (spiritual songs) and other instruction manuals. "Meditate alone in the forest and mountain retreats. Remain in the state of non-meditation," he teaches in the Mahamudra instruction to Naropa.

How can one meditate and not meditate at the same time? While it sounds like a paradox, it begins to make sense when you consider that non-meditation is a kind of meditation—but in this practice we leave behind complicated notions of what we are doing on the cushion. In non-meditation practice, there is no call to become extraordinary, no urge to change what is. Instead there is permission to accept your experience of the moment and drop the project of meditation.

Mahamudra, or "the great seal"—along with Dzogchen, "the great perfection"—is one of the simplest forms of meditation in the Tibetan tradition. In its most essential form, it is the art of just being. It is also one of the most difficult practices to successfully cultivate precisely because it is so simple.

We are naturally complex creatures, prone to taking a simple moment of experience—a sensory experience, a thought, or a feeling—and spinning a web of concepts around it. It is a real challenge, for example, to simply observe a thought without getting involved in its orbit. We tend to follow, resist, or judge our thoughts. Pretty soon, what started as a simple thought becomes a complex network of concepts and ideas accompanied by a swirling eddy of emotion and reactivity.

The same goes for our relationship to meditation. It is challenging for us to take a simple instruction such as "meditate on the breath every day" and just do it. Instead, we get involved in a vortex of thinking about the practice, framing the practice, resisting the practice, and comparing and judging our practice against a perceived ideal. Sometimes we even create a new identity around meditation practice. Whereas before we called ourselves a nurse, a teacher, a barista, or a jogger, now we are—in addition—a meditator, with all the self-concepts that accompany that label.

Meditation, in other words, is not only a practice; it is also a conceptual construct that carries weight in our life. That construct may have surprisingly little to do with the practice itself, yet we bring it with us as a subtle companion when we sit on the cushion.

The practice of non-meditation hastens recognition of this kind of conceptual baggage. It helps us see that concepts about what we are doing can sometimes inhibit the actual practice. When we drop the very thing we think we should be doing, suddenly the weight of everything we've been carrying becomes apparent. Ideas, we discover, can be heavy.

The instruction "Don't meditate" invites us to shine a light around and through the construct of meditation. As we explore non-meditation as a way of being, we might even suspend our meditation practice for a while and cease to live by its rules. Meditation is a doorway to freedom, but it will always be a doorway, not the destination. When we drop the project of meditation and suspend allegiance to a construct, we can rest in our immediate experience, just as it is, free from the filter of interpretation. This is important, because immediate experience holds the key to our freedom.

Non-Meditation Practice

The first time I heard the term "non-meditation" was in 1987, in a packed room near Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, when Kalu Rinpoche introduced the "Three Gates to Liberation," three key instructions on how to practice Mahamudra. They are not instructions for what to do but rather for what not to do. The practice, he told us, was this:

Do not fabricate
Do not meditate
Do not be distracted

In essence, Rinpoche explained, authentic practice is discovered when we let go and stop trying so hard. He taught that the heart of these three is nonmeditation, which involves the discovery of non- volitional space—a place where we drop striving and trust the fullness of what is already present.

When practicing non-meditation, we are not trying to accomplish a task or tether our mind to something, such as the breath. But we are not giving up either. So what are we doing? The short answer is that we are not doing—we are being. The initial task of non-meditation is to find a home in the present moment and let go of holding on to anything whatsoever. If there is a mantra of non-meditation, perhaps it is let go, let go, let go. We let go of intentions, schemes, expectations, projects, and grasping.

When we practice letting go again and again in this way, a spacious quality of mind that is naturally open and free emerges from the background of our consciousness into the foreground of our experience. If we can stay with the freshness of what is unfolding, aspects of our being conditioned by grasping and reactivity are gradually able to release.

Honing the skill of becoming a consummate nondoer does not mean becoming passive. It also does not mean our cognitive constructions—about meditation or anything else—vanish. Being, we discover, is not the antithesis of doing. Doing exists in the womb of being. So the practice of non-meditation is not so much an escape from constructions as it is a practice of noticing there is a great deal more to our experience than the constructions alone.

In non-meditation, our projections, beliefs, and opinions are held lightly, and the vibrant space around and within them becomes the refuge. In everyday life, we focus on the content of the mind's activity. In non-meditation, we focus on the energy of the mind's activity. From that vantage point, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and so on are just pure dynamic energy, neither good nor bad, neither right nor wrong. When we notice this, we ease up on ourselves. We become more aware of the relativity of our thoughts and are able to disentangle ourselves from them, which enables us to be less reactive to whatever is happening, inside or out. We trust the energy of thought more than its content and can therefore have a sense of humor about the antics of our own mind.

Natural Awareness Is Already Present

One of the assumptions I long carried with me as a meditator was that I am not good enough as I am. As a result, for many years I operated under the notion that meditation would fix me and make

me a better, more peaceful person. Many of us carry this notion deep down; we tend to come to the spiritual path wanting to make our lives and ourselves better.

In other words, when we embark on a project of meditation, we do so with a belief that it will lead us to a future state of peace. In Mahamudra practice, however, the goal is not a future peace. While the aspiration to attain inner peace or to be free from suffering may seem perfectly natural, there is a subtle kind of violence—and also a deep misunderstanding—in the notion that we are not sufficient as we are.

A basic tenet of Buddhism is that our innermost being is already aware, clear, and unwavering. Not in the future, but right now. In some traditions, this fully wise, awake aspect is called buddhanature. In Mahamudra practice, it is called natural awareness. Natural awareness is not a state; it is fundamental to who we are. We meditate in order to witness this clarity, spaciousness, and compassion as our innermost being.

When we first sit on the cushion, we may have trouble believing there is anything of that nature in a chaotic mind full of churning thoughts and feelings. But as we sit more and more, eventually we discover that a very subtle, quiet awareness is watching the chaos. Natural awareness is not thrown off by the chaos of the relative

mind. It remains grounded in every moment of experience, not separate from what it sees; it is a selfless, nondual watcher. It is completely ordinary and present in the now.

To experience this quiet watcher, we practice carefully observing the fundamental ground of present experience, the home and essence of the watcher. To the degree that meditation supports this reflexive gaze, it supports the recognition of natural awareness. But to the degree that meditation is future- or goal-oriented, it takes us away from natural awareness.

Right Here in This Wild Mind

In order to stay with a process of subtle self-observation, a commitment to tolerance is necessary. We have to become okay with our mind just as it is. Awakening is not found anywhere other than within this wild mind—not in the future nor in the past. So we need to find some friendliness toward everything arising in the mind. We cannot explore the truth of the mind while judging or reacting to it.

Non-meditation involves letting everything—the messiness and chaos—be there, creating a holding environment for the mind's gymnastics without suppressing, fixing, judging, or getting carried away by them. The practice of non-meditation is a practice of deeply accepting the truth of our present experience. This requires a great deal of patience and love.

This love and friendliness is well worth cultivating because as it turns out, the messiness itself is not a problem in need of fixing. Our messiness harbors the essence of natural awareness. We tend to believe that chaos is not fundamental to who we are, but in fact our chaos cannot be separated out from its ground and distilled into something more "pure." Natural awareness saturates it. So the practice is not to escape, suppress, or fix our mind but to see natural awareness within our wild mind.

If our practice is to simply notice natural awareness, a quality of mind that is already present right here and now within every moment, then it is counterproductive to try to make something special happen—even to bring about a meditation state (jhana) or meditative stability. Those practices, so prevalent in Buddhism, draw us toward thinking about a before and an after, pursuing special states of being.

Natural awareness has no before and after; it is already awake. It is already happening. It cannot happen later. There is no special event, other than noticing with increasing depth and intensity what is happening right now. Sometimes natural awareness is also called "ordinary awareness," emphasizing that it is nothing exotic or special. It is ever-present and ordinary, a constant reality. And yet to witness something this subtle directly is extraordinary and the essence of awakening.

So there is nothing to be cultivated in Mahamudra except this subtle turn of attention to what is already there, to something that we already are. Adding something onto our already present awareness, something that is labeled "meditation," becomes a distraction.

Always a Fresh Experience

The Tibetan word for meditation is gom, which essentially means "to get used to something by repeating it." When we meditate, we return to a technique again and again. This familiar return can be comfortable, but it can become repetitive or even boring, resulting in resistance to the practice itself. What can we do about this boredom and resistance?

Just as meditation carries the implication of repetition, the term "non-meditation" carries the implication that every time we sit we are not repeating the same thing again and again. We are observing something totally new in every moment. Every time you sit down, there is an encouragement to consider this meditation session as your very first. Simply by reframing our practice as non-repetition, we can acquaint ourselves with the uniqueness of each meditation session.

In Mahamudra meditation, the present moment of awareness becomes our meditation "object." Instead of doing something, we practice dropping effort and just resting in the here and now. If we are really in the present moment, a sense of adventure will often spontaneously arise, because anything can happen. There is an unpredictable unfolding of experience—feelings, perceptions, sounds, thoughts—as we ride the wave of now.

The past cannot be found anywhere. The future is also a fiction. This moment is indeed the only moment that has ever happened. In the practice of non-meditation, when you sit down it is the first and only time you have ever practiced. In the Mahamudra tradition, we find the term soma, which means "fresh," and it refers to the truth of the newness of our present experience. If we can find freshness in our sitting practice, it remains dynamic, adventurous, and joyful. We can reclaim that sense of discovery and excitement that we began with as practitioners.

What About Meditation?

With all this talk of non-meditation, you might wonder if there is room for a practice of meditation in this alternate universe. The answer is most definitely yes. If we can step out of the construct of meditation, enter the present moment of experience ' with deep acceptance, and dwell in the territory of natural awareness, that is excellent. But can we stay there? Most of us cannot remain

in the open ocean for long without needing a life raft. Shamatha and vipassana practices serve as a life raft, allowing us to develop focus and relaxation that we can bring to open awareness.

In Mahamudra, distraction does not mean straying from focus on an object. Distraction means straying from the relaxed, non-conceptual freshness of our present experience. When we get enmeshed in the past or future, we are distracted. When we grasp, we are distracted. Being undistracted in Mahamudra practice is a very subtle skill, much harder to master than the non-distraction of conventional shamatha. Fortunately, shamatha can strengthen the muscle of mindfulness, focus, and relaxation, helping us recognize what it means to be distracted and what it means to be focused before we work on the subtle art of staying grounded in wakeful presence.

What this means in daily practice is that focused shamatha is frequently used within a session as a kind of "tune-up" for the mind's attention. After focusing on the breath for a while, we then open up to a panoramic awareness of our present experience. From there, with more powerful attention, we can begin to explore the subtleties of innate natural awareness. In this way, on the heels of focused meditation, we can often stay in non-meditation with more focus and stability, and for a longer duration.

In Mahamudra training, this alternation continues for a long time. Therefore, while nonmeditation is classified as the main practice in the Mahamudra tradition, meditation is an important supportive practice. We might say that meditation and non-meditation need each other.

Non-Meditation as Fruition

This mutual reliance of meditation and non-meditation is reflected in descriptions of the fruition of Mahamudra practice, which is often expressed as a gradual refinement of consciousness unfolding as four stages of development called "the four yogas of Mahamudra." The four yogas are essentially four phases that a yogi progressively goes through when engaging in long-term practice. These stages are one-pointedness, simplicity, equal taste, and non-meditation.

One-pointedness is a state of focus in which the mind can stay with something without wavering for a long period of time. Simplicity is a state in which the mind's tendency to complicate things begins to dissolve naturally. At the stage of equal taste, the highs and lows of meditation, and of life generally, lose their volatility. Non-meditation is a level at which a yogi no longer needs to engage in meditation at all. The state of non-grasping and open relaxation is the yogi's baseline.

In the fruitional schema of Mahamudra, it becomes apparent that there is a difference between the practice of nonmeditation and its full blossoming. Fully blossoming non-meditation seems to be a developmental achievement, requiring time and a great deal of commitment over the long term. To really experience this blossoming, the mind needs to learn how to focus (one-point-edness) and release the tendency to grasp at the content of the mind (simplicity). The practitioner also needs to develop stable equanimity toward all experiences (equal taste). When the meditator has mastered those skills to the point where it changes their ongoing conscious experience, there is a possibility for authentic non-meditation to blossom.

A Paradigm Shift

Lately 1 have been tempted to answer the question "Do you meditate?" with the answer "Yes and no."

Do I sit? Yes. Do I watch my breath? Yes. Do I meditate? I hesitate to answer this question in the affirmative anymore because it is only a part of the picture.
This feels sacrilegious. How improper to be a dharma teacher who does not meditate! But this is the truth. I cannot answer "Yes" in good faith, because what the asker means by "meditation" is quite possibly not my main practice. I like to think of practice in other terms, as a kind of homecoming—a way of being present, of being in my body, of being in sacred relationship.

If we can find freshness in our sitting practice, we can reclaim that sense of discovery we began with as practitioners.

At a retreat I attended recently, Tsoknyi Rinpoche shared an old Mahamudra saying: "Sentient beings are not enlightened because they don't meditate. Yogis are not enlightened because they do." In other words, we need meditation to develop concentration, focus, calm, and simplicity. We need it to become more awake. But we do not need it forever. Eventually we must let go of technique and commit to the freedom it represents. Otherwise, like the yogis in the saying, we may interfere with our own enlightenment.

In a similar vein, in the *Alagaddupama Sutta*, the Buddha famously compares the dharma to a raft. You need the raft of dharma, he says, to get to the other shore of enlightenment. But once there, it makes no sense to carry the boat on dry land. Applying the same logic, meditation stabilizes states of concentration, relaxation, and ease in our mind. But once there, it may not serve to carry techniques beyond their useful life.

But how do we know when it's time to let go? The answer, the masters say, is found in innate natural awareness. Natural awareness, when we glimpse it, requires a paradigm shift: we must relinquish control and trust in natural awareness to drive the practice, rather than the other way around. At that point, while we

may indeed continue to sail the waters and even—Buddha willing—reach the other shore, we will discover that we have always been standing on the same old ground.

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