

Sitting Meditation Step by Step:

Being in the Body, Labeling, and Opening into the Heart of Experiencing

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The Buddhist practice of sitting meditation

has three aspects.

Being in the body is the ground of practice.

Labeling our thoughts breaks our identification with them.

Opening into the heart of experience awakens us to love and compassion.

I used to approach sitting, and especially retreats, with the idea that meditation was supposed to make me feel a special way. Often, I just wanted to be free from anxiety. As a consequence, I rarely had a clear idea of what sitting was really about. Even now, when I'm no longer trying to feel some special way from sitting, I still find it helpful occasionally to reorient myself to exactly what I'm doing in my sitting practice.

How often have you realized, right in the middle of a sitting, that you don't even know what the basic practice is? How often have you asked yourself, "What exactly am I supposed to be doing here?"

This confusion is a normal part of the practice path, which is a good reason to review basic sitting instructions regularly. Practice can never be learned just through reading or thinking about it. To awaken clarity based on genuine understanding, we have to learn from our own experience. Nonetheless, it's good to have a clear overview of what sitting practice is, even if it is, in part, conceptual.

Meditation practice can be divided into three parts. These three are not really separate and distinct; they are a continuum. For the purposes of description, however, we will look at these three aspects of sitting as if they were separate.

The first aspect of sitting is being-in-the-body. This is the basic ground of practice. When we first sit down to meditate, we take a specific posture. The important point is not which posture we take, but whether we're actually present to the physical experience. Being-in-the-body means we're awake, aware, present to what is actually going on. So even though it's true certain postures are conducive to this level of awareness, it's also true that we can meditate on a subway, standing up or lying in bed.



It's useful to have a routine to bring awareness to the physical reality of the moment, especially when we first sit down to meditate. For example, when I sit down I ask myself, "What is going on right now?" Then I touch in with my physical state, my mental/emotional state, and the environmental input (temperature, sound, light, and so on). This check might only take a few seconds, but it immediately takes me out my mental realm and grounds me in the more concrete physical world. The point is not to think about the body, the emotions, or the environment, but to actually feel them.

After this quick check, I return awareness to the posture by telling myself: "Allow the head to float to the top, so that the lower back can lengthen, broaden and soften." This reminder brings me further into my bodily experience. Throughout the sitting period, whenever I find myself spinning off into thoughts, I use this reminder to bring my awareness back to the present moment. The essence of being-in-the-body is simply to be here.

Normally, after settling into the sitting posture, I bring awareness to the breath in a very concentrated way for just a few minutes. I am not thinking about the breath, but bringing awareness to the actual sensations of it entering and leaving my body. For this brief period, when thoughts arise I don't label them; I narrow my awareness to focus solely on the experience of breathing. The value of this practice is that it allows me to settle into sitting.

But the value of this (or any other) concentrative practice - that it can shut life out - is also its limitation. Practice is about opening to life, not about shutting it out. And even though continuous concentration on the breath can make us feel calm and relaxed as well as focused and centered, this is not the point of sitting practice. As much as we would like to have pleasing or special experiences, the path of meditation is about being awake. It's about being awake to whatever we feel. It's ultimately about learning to be with our life as it is. So although concentration practices can certainly be helpful at times, we aspire to spend most of our sitting time in a more wide-open awareness.

Wide-open awareness is the essence of being-in-the-body. This is where we become aware of bodily sensations, thoughts, changing states of mind, and input from the environment. The practice is just to be aware, to simply observe and experience whatever is happening. There is really nothing special about this approach - it is very low key. We're attempting to see and experience life as it arises by letting it just be there - minus our opinions and judgments. This approach highlights the never-ending struggle between just being here and our addiction to the comfort and security of our mental world.

So this first aspect of sitting - being-in-the-body - simple as it sounds, is actually very difficult. Why? Because we don't want to be here. A strong part of us prefers the self-centered dream of

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plans and fantasies. That's what makes this practice so difficult: the constant, unromantic, non-exotic struggle just to be here. As we sit in wide-open awareness, however, as the body/mind gradually settles down, we can begin to enter the silence, where passing thoughts no longer hook us. We enter the silence not by trying to enter, but through the constant soft effort to be present, allowing life to just be.

The second mode of sitting is labeling and experiencing. As we sit, emotions arise. Sometimes they pass when we become aware of them. But sometimes they demand more of our attention. When that happens, we become more focused in our practice. With precision we begin to label our thoughts. As well, we focus on experiencing the bodily state that is an inextricable part of an emotional reaction.

As emotions arise, we can ask, "What is this?" The answer to this question is never analytical. It cannot be reached with thought, because it is not what the emotion is about. It's what it is. So we look to our experience itself, noticing where we feel the emotion in the body. We notice its quality or texture. We notice its changing faces. And we come to know, as if for the first time, what the emotion actually feels like.

Invariably we will slip back into thinking. As long as we are caught in thinking, we can't continue to experience the bodily component of our emotions. In fact, the more intense the emotion, the more we will want to believe our thoughts. So the practice is to label the thoughts over and over-to see them clearly and to break our identification with them. That will almost always involve moving back and forth between labeling and experiencing.

Learning to stay with - to reside in - our emotions in this way allows us to see how most of our emotional distress is based on our conditioning, and particularly on the decisions and beliefs that arose out of that conditioning. We come to see that these emotional reactions, which we often fear and prefer to avoid, amount to little more than believed thoughts and strong or unpleasant physical sensations. We can see that when we are willing to experience them with precision and curiosity, we no longer have to fear them, or push them away. Thus our belief systems become clarified.

The third aspect of our sitting practice is opening into the heart of experiencing. On those occasions when we experience dense, intense or even overwhelming emotions, when we seem so confused that we don't even know how to practice - what can we do?

When the precision of labeling thoughts is not an option, the practice is to breathe the painful reaction into the center of the chest. Although eventually we will still need to clarify the believed thoughts that are an inextricable part of our emotional reaction, for now we simply open to our deepest fears and humiliations. We're pulling our swirling physical sensations, via the in-breath, into the center of the chest, allowing the center of the chest to be a container of awareness for our strong emotions. We're not trying to change anything. We're just learning to fully experience our

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emotions. Why? Because experiencing our emotions fully will allow them to break through the layers of self-protective armor and awaken our heart. Fully felt, our emotions will clear the path to the deep well of love and compassion that is the essence of our being.

It is in these darker moments, when we feel overwhelmed, that we are apt to judge ourselves most harshly. We're likely to solidify the most negative core beliefs about ourselves, seeing ourselves as weak, as losers, as hopeless. It's at this point that we most need a sense of heart, of kindness, of lightness, in the practice. We do this by learning to breathe into the heartspace, thereby undercutting the relentless self-judgment of our deeply held beliefs. As we breathe into this space, piercing our armoring and awakening the heart, we can open into a more benign awareness toward ourselves and the human predicament. We can begin to relate to ourselves as we might relate to a defenseless child in distress - nonjudgmentally, with friendliness, tolerance and kindness. Our willingness to breathe into the heart, to stay in that space for just one more breath, shows us our strength, our courage to go on.

By opening into the heart of experiencing, we can come to understand that everything is workable. This is one of the key points of practice. Our efforts to be-in-the-body, and to label and experience, will inevitably "fail" at times. We will have periods of aspiration and effort, followed by dry spots and apathy. Ups and downs in practice are predictable and inevitable. That we seize these ups and downs as opportunities to judge ourselves - as failures or as superstars - is the problem. The countermeasure is always to simply persevere-to attend to one more breath, to label one more thought, to experience one more sensation, to enter just one more time into the heartspace. We can then experience for ourselves that it is ultimately possible to work with everything. It may not be possible today, but it is possible. In fact, it may take years of work in all three aspects of sitting practice for this understanding to become real to us.

Until now I've spoken of these three modes of sitting as if they were distinct from each other. In truth, although each mode does entail a different aspect of practice, they do have one essential thing in common: they all require that we experience this present moment. That's what our practice always comes down to: just being here. By continually allowing the light of awareness to shine on the confusion and anxiety of the present moment, we break the circuitry of our conditioning. This is the slow transformative path to freedom.

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