

## MEDITATION INSTRUCTIONS

These instructions are intended only for those who do not yet have a practice or for those who want to learn a new one. If you already have a silent meditation practice, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, and if you plan to continue it, please feel free to practice it at any meeting or retreat with us.

Our retreats usually include people from several different traditions and lineages. Although the following instructions come from one of the Vipassana lineages, the practice of mindfulness or awareness is central to all of our traditions, so cultivating awareness should not interfere with either the spirit or the practice of your own tradition, whatever it maybe.

### SITTING MEDITATION

**Posture.** Sit or kneel in a position that feels stable, using a cushion, a meditation bench, a chair, or the plain floor. Try to keep your spine straight in order to help keep your mind more alert. **Don't force** your body into a posture it isn't used to; rather, let it stretch gradually over time into the new posture. **Don't hold** your body in a position where it might be injured. In order to calm the mind, it's better to remain unmoving in sitting meditation, but to avoid hurting your body, shift positions if you feel much pain.

**Mindfulness of Breathing.** "Mindfulness," the Buddha said, "is the pathway to the Deathless." Close your eyes and turn your attention inward. Find that place in your body where breathing feels most obvious. For most people that's at the abdomen or the nostrils, but it can be anywhere. Bring your attention to that place and try to keep it there without a sense of forcing. Simply know the bare sensations of breathing with as much directness and subtlety as possible. Let awareness of other things go. Your mind will wander in thought. As soon as you notice that wandering, without judgment let the thoughts go and bring your awareness back to breathing with a kind of gentle, gliding motion in your mind. **Don't try to stop thinking**, a common error, because that effort will surely fail. **Just let go of thought** once you recognize it and return to mindfulness of the breath. Be patient and gentle with yourself. Training our minds to be aware is very difficult, but success is certain if we patiently persist.

**Extending Mindfulness.** Once you find that your attention has begun to wander less and can stay on the sensations of breathing with some stability, then try extending mindfulness to other sensations in your body. Use awareness of breathing as your anchor: start there, then extend your awareness to some other sensation, like tightness in the shoulders, and then return "home" to awareness of breathing. Notice clearly which sensations are pleasant, which are unpleasant, and which are neutral. Can you learn to be with them all equally, without reaction?

After you find that you can track events throughout your body without a lot of wandering off into thought, try extending mindfulness further to include mental events, too: knowing thoughts as thoughts, emotions as emotions, mental images as mental images, and consciousness (the function of knowing) as consciousness. Notice here, too, what events are pleasant, what unpleasant, and what neutral. Can you begin to learn to be with all emotions equally? After you extend awareness further to include seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting, you will have opened your field of mindfulness to encompass all that we can experience.

## **WALKING MEDITATION**

Walking meditation is identical to sitting meditation, except that you are training your mind to pay attention to a moving body instead of a sitting one. Try to maintain awareness of the sensations of walking, bringing attention back when you see that the mind has wandered off into thought. In some traditions formal walking meditation is done in a group; in others it's done alone. If you do it alone, it's useful to move more slowly than usual and to walk without a destination. Walk back and forth on some straight track about fifteen to twenty paces long.

## **MINDFULNESS IN DAILY LIFE**

In every moment, during any activity at all, we have a chance to wake up by being present, and being present comes from being aware. Pay attention to sensations in all the body's postures: sitting, walking, standing, lying down. Watch what your mind is doing in all its moods. Ask yourself, "What's happening?" in order to stimulate mindfulness in the moment. Then ask, "How am I relating to this?" in order to see whether you're caught or free. Is there reaction in your mind? Is there a way to let go? The Buddha said that freedom through mindfulness comes like slowly filling a bucket, drop by patient drop. Each moment of seeing clearly what is here and then letting it be, though it may seem inconsequential, is significant. One day the bucket overflows.

## **MENTAL NOTING**

A word about the practice of noting what is happening by labeling it with a silent thought. Some of our Buddhist traditions practice noting; others avoid it. You might experiment with it to see if it's helpful to you or not. If you decide to try it, just identify whatever is happening in your body or mind by labeling it with one word spoken silently: "in out" or "rising falling" for breathing; "thinking," "seeing," "joy," "tingling," "anger," "burning," and so forth. When you are moving slowly in walking meditation, try noting each part of each step: "lifting, moving, placing." The value of noting is to help direct mindfulness to whatever's happening, and also to antidote thought with thought.