

# A Starter Kit for Establishing a Meditation Practice

## Practice Suggestions:

- Over the coming 3 or 4 weeks, practice mindfulness for 20 to 45 minutes every day for at least 6 days this week using the recordings available on my site: <http://www.bemindful.org/freedownloads.htm> Feel free to mix it up a bit, using the Body Scan some days, one or two of the other guided meditations on other days. If you are currently in a relationship, it would be great if you practiced together and read through and discussed this material when you have time to sit quietly and really listen to each other.
- Practice mindfulness of your breathing from time to time throughout the day
- Read and reflect upon “The Journey”
- Read and reflect upon “Meditation and the Practice of Awareness”

You can find many more resources on my site: <http://www.bemindful.org/art.htm>

And learn about current classes and programs: <http://www.bemindful.org/retreat.htm>

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity and acceptance of present-moment reality. It wakes us up to the fact that our lives unfold only in moments. If we are not fully present in many of those moments, we may not only miss what is most valuable in our lives, but also fail to realize the richness and the depth of our possibilities for growth and transformation.

Dwelling in stillness and looking inward for some part of each day, we touch what is most real and reliable in ourselves and most easily overlooked and undeveloped. When we can be centered in ourselves, even for brief periods of time in the face of the pull of the outer world, not having to look elsewhere for something to fill us up or make us happy, we can be at home wherever we find ourselves, at peace with things as they are, moment by moment.

From: “*Wherever You Go, There You Are*” by Jon Kabat-Zinn, pgs 4 and 96.

# The Journey

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice-  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
"Mend my life!"  
each voice cried.  
But you didn't stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations, though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen branches and stones.  
but little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do-  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

*Mary Oliver, Dream Work, Grove Atlantic Inc., 1986 & New and Selected Poems, Beacon Press, 1992.*

# Meditation and the Practice of Awareness

by Larry Rosenberg

The method of meditation I teach can be seen as a two-step process - samatha and vipassana, or calming and wisdom - with breath awareness as the cornerstone of the practice. The breathing is an ideal object to focus on. It isn't like a mantra; it has no cultural connotations or other associations. It isn't like a physical object, so that you have to be in a certain place or carry it with you. Breathing is simple and portable; we are all doing it all the time. We can notice it not just when we are sitting in meditation but at any time during the day. And it is always happening in the present. It is our doorway into the present moment.

In order to practice breath awareness as a formal method, the meditator chooses a quiet place and settles into a relaxed but erect sitting posture: cross-legged, with a cushion under the but-tocks to help the spine stay straight; kneeling, usually with a cushion or a bench under the buttocks for support; **or sitting in a chair**, with the feet on the floor. In all of these postures there are three points of contact, so you are stable, like a three-legged stool, and you hold yourself straight, not in a rigid military way but in a relaxed manner, with just the amount of energy that it takes to stay erect.

Then you bring your attention to the process of breathing, in whatever locale it seems most vivid to you, the nostrils, the chest area, or the abdomen. You don't try to breathe in some particular way. You simply observe the breathing as it is, the in-breath, perhaps a short pause, the out-breath, perhaps a longer pause. You take notice of this simple process without which none of us would be alive. You don't do it; you let it happen. You surrender to the natural process that is already going on.

The act of following the breathing is quite profound; it can be, quite literally, the work of a lifetime. The more we watch it, the more we see that the breath is a whole world, a universe unto itself, and as we follow it over the course of months and years we go deeper and deeper.

Some breaths are long; some are short. Sometimes the breathing seems to take place in the chest; sometimes it is way down in the belly. Sometimes it feels brief and tight and constricted; other times it is effortless and very deep. It might be smooth, like silk, or rough and coarse, like burlap. All of these variations are possible, and countless others in between, even within the space of a single sitting. There is tremendous variety in the simple act of breathing. You realize eventually that no two breaths are alike.

The human mind, of course, is a lively instrument, and it has many things it would like to do other than follow the breathing. Most of us are quite restless and distracted; we don't

realize just how distracted until we try to do a simple thing like following the breathing. Our minds, it seems, would rather do anything else. All kinds of things come up. That mental activity isn't really a problem; it's a discovery. You're seeing how wild your mind really is.

But at this stage of the practice, you don't want to look at that wildness in detail. When you see that the mind has wandered away, notice that, then come back - without any feeling of shame or judgment - to the simple act of breathing. At some sittings it may seem that that's all you're doing: noticing, you're away, then coming back. Other times - especially as your practice progresses - you may be able to stay with the breathing for longer and longer periods. It doesn't matter how you're doing; this isn't a competition and you don't want to struggle. Come to see, instead, that the awareness of unawareness is in itself valuable practice. Wandering away from the breathing isn't a mistake or the sign of a weak character. Simply follow the breathing, and when you notice you're away, come back.

The point of samatha practice is primarily to calm the mind. But of course, you can't help noticing what is coming up as you do that and sometimes you will notice that one thing is coming back again and again, maybe a pain in the body, maybe a state of mind, like anger or fear. It is as if this one thing keeps calling you away from the breathing.

Sometimes even in this early stage of the practice it is a good idea to expand the scope of your awareness to include what has become problematic. You can also temporarily drop the breath and give some attention to whatever keeps calling you away. You pay attention to it for awhile, the same way you've been focusing on the breathing, and that usually has the effect of calming it down and making it less persistent. Once it has lost some of its charge, you can go back to the breathing.

Beginners often ask how long they should sit. I really have no idea. In the introductory class I teach, which lasts ten weeks, I start people out at about fifteen minutes and try to work up to an hour, under the assumption that, between the weekly classes, they are sitting most days at home. On retreats most of our sittings are forty-five minutes, though some last for an hour. I encourage newcomers to sit a bit beyond what they regard as their limit, to challenge themselves without making sitting an ordeal. If there is no challenge they lose interest; if the challenge is too severe they may get discouraged and stop practice.

But however long you sit, the end of the sitting period shouldn't mark the end of mindfulness. The real point of practice is to bring the same kind of attention to everything; just as you give your attention to the breathing as you sit, you should give your attention to taking a shower, eating breakfast, talking to your family. Sitting and following the breathing, because it is so simple, is in some ways the easiest thing we do. Our real goal is to be as mindful as possible in all the activities that make up our day.

People also ask how long they should follow this first step of practice before they go on to the second. That is another impossible question. What I usually say is that you should continue following the breathing until you get reasonably good at it, until you achieve some degree of calm and stability. That doesn't mean that other things don't come up but that you're able to notice them fairly quickly and come back to the breathing. Thoughts may still be there, but you're able to let them come and go without getting caught up in them.

In a ten-week introductory class, I might move on to the second step after seven or eight weeks. On a nine-day retreat, at which people are meditating all day, I move on after three or four days. I always let people know that they don't have to switch. If they want to continue with the breathing, that is perfectly all right.

Following the breathing is not kindergarten. It really is, as I've said, a profound practice, which gets more profound the more you do it. You shouldn't feel any compulsion to move on. Conscious breathing can help take you all the way to enlightenment.

The second step opens to a much larger field. Ultimately it opens to a kind of attention that is limitless, literally infinite. In this style of meditation, you might begin by focusing on the breathing, but once you have achieved some degree of calm you open the attention to whatever is happening, in your body and your mind and your surroundings. You might retain the breathing as a kind of anchor; that is probably a good idea for most people, though some will drop the breath altogether.

Now you are opening to the things you saw as distractions before, all the phenomena that were taking you away from the breathing. Before, they were in the background and the breathing in the foreground. Now, perhaps, they are the foreground and the breathing is the background. Or perhaps - as the practice grows more subtle - there is no foreground or background: there is just everything that is happening, all at once, a unified field.

There will be sounds, certainly; almost anywhere you are, even in a supposedly silent meditation hall, there are sounds, both inside and outside the room. There might be sensations in the body; a feeling of pain or tension, one of relaxation or relief. There might be smells, or a breeze passing through. There might be thoughts. You don't - as when you were following the breath - want to get caught up in a process of thinking, but you will certainly see thoughts pass through your mind. There might also be complex emotional states like fear or sadness, composed of both thoughts in the mind and feelings in the body.

Watching all of these phenomena come and go is more complicated than following the breathing; watching the breathing has prepared you for this more complex practice. Sometimes it may seem too complex, too many things are present, or you keep getting lost

in thought. In that case it is probably a good idea to go back to the breathing, perhaps for a few breaths, until you've calmed down, or perhaps for the remainder of the sitting. That isn't an admission of defeat. It is just wisdom: seeing how things are for you and what the best way to practice is.

In another way, of course, what I'm describing isn't complicated or difficult at all. What you are really learning- and this begins with following the breath - is the art of doing less and less until finally you are doing nothing, just being as you are and letting your experience come to you.

There are no distractions; you are mindful of your present experience just as it is. Nothing in particular is supposed to happen. You attend to what is there just because it is there. It is your life at that moment. We are used to doing things all the time, trying to change our environment, improve our situation, so it may seem difficult to do nothing. Actually, there is nothing easier. You just sit and let the world come to you.

In time you will see that these two steps - shamatha (concentration) and vipassana (insight) - are not easy and difficult, or basic and advanced; they are just two ways to practice, one of which is appropriate for some times, one for others. You'll begin to see it as an art, moving from the breath to a wider focus or - sometimes - deciding to go back to the breath again. Samatha and vipassana work together like the right and the left hand in cooperation. A calm steady mind is more able to see insightfully. And insights calm the mind. There is not necessarily a right way to move back and forth, certainly not a perfect way. This isn't a realm where perfection is possible. You never come to the end of the practice of awareness. It will serve you well for the rest of your life.

Taken from: *Living In The Light Of Death: On the Art of Being Truly Alive* by Larry Rosenberg with David Guy, Shambhala, Boston & London, 2001.