

Meditation: a few notes

By Grace Bubeck (2003/4)

Meditation is a practice in presence: being fully present in each moment. It is a practice for the mind: it creates focus. It is also a practice for the heart: it asks us to surrender fully to what is, including to ourselves and the difficulties we may encounter in meditating. Last but not least, it's a practice in patience: like in learning a new sport, you have to invest quite some time and effort before it starts getting easier and more automatic and effective. Be realistic in your expectations.

1 Posture

Your back should be as straight and erect as possible without forcing yourself. The erect posture ensures a good flow of energy along your spine and thus the required alertness / vitality for your meditation. Every other part of the body, even all the muscles in the back around the spine, are best kept in a state of relaxation (as much as possible – one way of leading into the meditation is through a body relaxation). Throughout the meditation it's good to monitor your posture from time to time, especially when you realize you're slumping, or when you notice tension or pain. But make sure the monitoring doesn't become a way of keeping your mind busy!

3 possible postures:

- 1: sitting in a chair with a straight back, supporting the back; keep legs uncrossed and feet firmly supported by floor
- 2: kneeling on the floor (or mat) on a bolster, cushion or meditation stool
- 3: sitting crosslegged (for this posture make sure the knees are lower than your hips so as to have a stable triangle to support your spine, or support your knees with cushions or bolsters; change the position of legs (which leg is inside, which outside?) regularly so as to not lead to asymmetric holding in the body).

Posture is important, as it can help or hinder the meditation: it helps it by allowing us to sit comfortably and supporting alertness, it hinders it if it becomes uncomfortable and painful as it then becomes a distraction (this is when you need to consider adjusting your posture).

2 The busy mind

We all start with a busy mind, to various degrees. Nobody is a 'natural' meditator whose mind is always focused and calm, though there clearly are differences in how easily people meditate. But **the busy mind is part of our human condition, and we all have to contend with it!** If it bothers you when you're trying to meditate, especially

when you feel stressed in one way or another, remember that the busy mind is part of being stressed, preoccupied, anxious, angry etc. It's normal.

You don't have to have a calm mind to start meditating. When your mind is busy, you meditate with your mind being busy – it'll get less busy as you meditate and surrender. Paradoxically, the less you're trying to calm your mind, the less you're 'fighting' your busy mind, the more it will relax and calm down by itself. Fighting anything that might 'prevent' you from meditating (nothing really does) renders the mind even more busy, so let go of the fighting and struggling. Focus instead on the object of meditation, on just sitting and practicing, noticing as you go along when you got distracted and bringing yourself back gently and firmly, without judgment.

One meditation teacher says the whole teaching of meditation can be summed up as 'let go, let go, let go'. I'd add: and then let go some more! It's not part of our cultural heritage in the West to know how to let go. Instead we have learnt how to persist, how to push, how 'make things happen'. In meditation, this strategy will not work, and it's important to realize that it's exactly the struggling that makes your mind so busy. In bringing our mind back to the same focus over and over again we trick ourselves out of the habit of struggling and out of its busy-ness. We're not going anywhere, and we're not trying to achieve anything, we're just practicing meditation and trusting that it'll have its effect eventually. (And the effect may take some time to show, just keep on going.)

3 What we focus on: the 'objects' of focus

The way we can get past the busy mind is by focusing on something simple and always present (or repetitive, such as a mantra). The point here is to keep on bringing the mind back to that focus, whatever it is. Whenever we notice that the mind has 'taken off', we take it back, gently but firmly, to this focus (like a sheep that got lost from the flock). Don't tell yourself off about getting distracted, be matter of fact about it: 'oh, I just got distracted, so I'll bring myself back'. What you're practicing here is to get the mind used to you being in charge / the shepherd who guides the sheep, instead of the mind running your life (the busy mind scenario). Meditating, especially at the beginning, is more a certain gesture – bringing the mind back to focus and then staying there – than a state of mind. It is a kind of training where you practice the same thing over and over again, until it becomes habitual and automatic (like in learning a sport). By the time it's become habitual and automatic, your mind will have become a lot less busy already!

The 'objects' of focus:

1. the breath: you can focus on the rhythm of breathing, or on sensations from breathing (air coming in through the nose, expansion and contraction of chest or belly);

2. mantra: any word or phrase that you repeat to yourself every so often; when you find your mind wandering, bring it back to the mantra by repeating it again;
3. visual or sensory perception: it's good to keep the image simple, such as a source of light shining on you, or a source of warmth/cool radiating onto you and allowing you to let go, to relax; NOTE: it's not necessary to 'see' light literally (or anything else) in order to choose a visual or perceptual object as focus – you can just 'imagine' it in any way you can; the more elaborate the image or perception, the busier it is, and the busier you will be!
4. simple visual object, such as a candle or a flower: here meditation turns into contemplation – the boundaries are not always clear (the same is possible when a mantra leads to contemplation);
5. auditory object: the object of meditation can be whatever noises are there around you (relatively advanced and not easy to do); meditation tapes are an easier way of focusing on just one source of auditory stimulus; listening to meditative music; be careful to keep your mind centred inside yourself instead of on what you listen to; the danger with both visual and auditory objects outside of ourselves is that they 'draw us out' too much, that they don't allow us to keep the mind centred and inside ourselves; I would not recommend either of these for beginners;
6. posture: you can focus on sitting or standing in a certain way, on any sensations associated with this posture; on the overall 'feeling' of this posture;
7. movement: it should be relatively slow, as in walking meditation; focus on the 'feeling' of / sensations caused by the movement in your body;
8. physical sensations: any sensations from within your body, any parts of the body, can become what you focus on (relatively advanced); an easier version of this is to go through the body systematically to see what you can sense there: this gives the mind more focus, but also more to do, hence it's a relatively 'busy' kind of meditation;
9. emotional states: 'sitting with' and witnessing what emotional state we're in; again a relatively demanding thing to do, but can be very helpful when we're emotionally very wound up; be careful not to get caught in the emotion, to stay in a witnessing state vis-à-vis the emotion (or to bring yourself back to that if you did get caught up in it); Pema Chödrön calls this 'sitting in the fire';
10. development of emotional states, such in the development of loving kindness, or forgiveness, or compassion;
11. mental states and trains of thought: yes, you can even witness your own mind as it does its usual thing, keeping itself busy with everything under the sun, past or future; in order to stay in a witnessing/observing state, it's useful to label the thoughts/states as you observe them as 'past' or 'future' or more specifically if this feels appropriate (fearful, worried, angry etc etc);

Basically, anything can become a focus for meditation. At the beginning, it's useful to stick to the simpler ones such as breath, mantras, simple visual images, body sensations, posture / simple movement.

4 Moving into meditation, meditating, coming out of it

It's good to give yourself time to move into meditation and to come out of it. Moving in can take a good part of the time if you find yourself very busy or very preoccupied, moving out needn't take that long, just a moment to stretch and reorient yourself to your life and to whatever follows next. Moving in usually requires bringing your energy down from being busy, moving out usually means getting back into a faster and less contemplative mode of being. (But it would be good to have the intention to stay focused and relaxed after the meditation as well.) Whatever you do to move in, don't forget to check in with yourself: how's your mind, your body, your emotional state? Choose to move into meditation accordingly.

Ways of moving into meditation:

1. body relaxation: going through the body systematically (to reduce busy-ness);
2. any other way of bringing yourself into the body: yoga, foot- or neck-massage, stretching, walking – feel free to be creative (ditto);
3. focusing on an object: candle, altar, picture or anything else (to create focus);
4. reading inspirational or contemplative literature (to open at a spiritual level);
5. listening to some calming, soothing music or natural sounds (relaxing);
6. if you're tired, you might need to get into some movement to be more alert;
7. if you're very emotional, sit with the emotion for a while (or for the whole session);

Whatever you do, allow yourself to be creative and respond to how you feel at the time: 'customise' the beginning, and you'll be better able to focus for the rest of the meditation. This is what it means not to struggle: you go with what's there instead of wanting to be elsewhere (i.e. in an ideal mental state that you're trying to attain).

5 Establishing a habit

Human beings are creatures of habit. There are good habits and bad habits: good habits support us in our lives and enhance our well-being, bad habits work against it. Being stressed out, worrying, trying to do 5 things at the same time, being busy all the time, etc etc. are bad habits. Meditating is a good habit. We get into bad habits without having to do anything very much, they just happen. Good habits take determination and time to establish. Until you're in the good habit you have to use will power and discipline to create it. Here are some tips as to how you can get into the habit of meditating.

- ☺ Try to be as regular as possible, i.e. meditate every morning or every evening, (or at every red traffic light,) at least until you are in the habit of doing so. If you feel you don't have the time meditate for less time but every day.
- ☺ Set yourself up physically: find a corner or space in your home where you meditate and set it up as your meditation space. Add whatever is conducive to meditation, whatever evokes calm and focus for you: a candle, an image, a Buddha or figure of a saint (be creative and feel free to integrate whatever religious or spiritual imagery or objects are meaningful to you). Often people set up a little altar on which they put things, but an image on the wall or a little shelf will do, too.
- ☺ Use the same chair or cushion which herewith become your meditation chair or cushion and which support you in your meditation posture.
- ☺ Find rituals to mark the beginning and end of your meditation period: to begin light a candle, burn some incense, recite some verses or mantras, ring a bell, chant om, bow, pray, take a few deep breaths, etc etc; to end blow out the candle, ring a bell, give thanks, stretch, take a few deep breaths, etc etc. Note that getting into and out of the meditation posture is already a little ritual by itself, and you can use that, too, just by doing it consciously.

6 The five hindrances

Hindrances are what prevents you from meditating or what takes you out of / away from meditation. The most important thing is to spot them and identify them as they happen. Once you've identified them you can then decide what to do about them. A first line of action is just to identify and note the hindrance and then decide to go back to meditation. As in everything, awareness allows for choice: once you're aware of the hindrance you can then choose what to do with it, i.e. ideally sidestep it. If the hindrance is not that strong, that's possible. But if it is strong you will need to know how to deal with it.

The first two hindrances refer to the level of energy or activity in the meditator, the second two to emotional tendencies. The last one stands on its own.

In working with the hindrances it's good to recognize that we each have habitual patterns (character traits) which make us prone to one or two of these hindrances more than the others: some of us are daydreamers or pleasure-seekers, some doubt everything including themselves, some are anxious and overactive, some are on the too-relaxed side, some find conflicts everywhere. If you are able to identify your dominant habitual tendency you can work with it in meditation; doing so will also have a carry-over effect on the rest of your life.

1. Traditionally called 'sloth and torpor', this hindrance is best understood as a mental and/or physical dullness, a state in which there is not enough energy,

vitality or alertness to keep the meditation going. Instead, you will simply nod off, your body slumps, and your mind loses its focus and 'turns off'.

For those of you who want to relax with meditation, this hindrance needs to be understood as a real hindrance: going to sleep is not meditating, and relaxing beyond a certain point takes you out of meditation. The state of energy needed for meditation is half way between over-active and dull, or a balance between a relaxed and a vital, active state. It is a calmness that's at the same time very vital and energized, but without being speedy. There is a characteristic deep aliveness in meditative states that's very different from being sleepy and dull.

The way to deal with this hindrance is to bring vitality and focus back to your meditation. Physically, this means getting out of the slump back to a straight back (feel the energy moving in your spine); energetically, raising your energy level, for this it helps to focus more on the upper half of the body or even the head (third eye), or you may even just will yourself to be more alert; mentally, refocusing on the object of the meditation.

2. Traditionally called 'restlessness', this refers to a mind and body that are overactive: 'ants in your pants' and the busy mind. Anxiety/worry is one of the main emotional tendencies that produce this restlessness. Energetically, this means there is too much energy moving too fast, and we need to bring our energy level down. Physically, we need to relax and let go of tension. Mentally and emotionally, it means there is a need to 'let go and let God', to surrender and trust / have faith. Surrendering is a major challenge especially for us children of the West who have grown up in a culture which believes in controlling everything and leaving nothing up to chance. There is much in life that simply cannot be controlled or 'fixed', and the ultimate challenge for those of us driven by anxiety is to realize that the desire to control is based on an illusion.

As I have said a lot already about the busy mind, not much needs to be repeated here except the essentials: you bring your energy down by moving out of your head into your body (see moving into meditation), holding and/or gently massaging your solar plexus can be very helpful for anxiety-driven restlessness; mentally, you focus on the object of meditation and return to this focus every time you lose it; emotionally, you may need to 'sit with' the underlying anxiety for some time if it's too strong, as you allow it to be there it usually diminishes; physically, doing a body relaxation first or even as your main form of meditation will help reduce fidgeting. You can also visualize your endless thoughts as clouds on a vast sky and let them drift out of sight until the sky is vast, blue and empty.

3. Traditionally called 'desire for sense experience', this refers to the tendency we all have to want or crave what is pleasant: good food, lovely cuddling, great sex, physical comfort etc etc. So the mind wanders off to fantasies about such experiences instead of staying with the meditation (it may also be thinking about

what we'll have for dinner or remembering a sensual night). I should add that one of the most widespread cravings in the West is a craving for thinking, for figuring things out. This can be as distracting as more sensual desires and is not as easily recognized as the more obvious fantasies or daydreams (and traditionally not discussed). The point about both is that we really lose ourselves in them and that takes us away from meditation. As it is so pleasurable to follow these fantasies or endless wanderings of the mind, we can easily spend a whole meditation with them and not even realize!

There's nothing else to do but to return to the object of focus once you've noticed you've let yourself follow a craving or desire. You may have to be very determined in doing this if this is a habitual tendency of yours! If so, it helps to set an intention before you start meditating to catch yourself as quickly as possible when you give in to this tendency. Beware that whenever meditation becomes too pleasant and cozy, you're likely to have gone off into a pleasant fantasy or thought process.

4. Traditionally called 'hatred', this refers to the opposite tendency to craving, i.e. the tendency to reject and push away, be angry and frustrated with what is unpleasant, painful or irritating. We may be angry or frustrated as we start meditating, or the anger may come back to us as we meditate (if this is a recent situation of conflict), or the anger may arise during meditation as a response to something that happens (noise, a telephone call, being interrupted etc etc). This category includes getting angry and hating ourselves for not being able to meditate, calm down, etc etc!!!

In the Asian understanding, both desire for what is pleasant and hatred of what is unpleasant are seen as forms of craving, as tendencies that we have as human beings and that we act on unconsciously and unawares most of the time. Becoming aware of those tendencies is the only way not to be in their grip, and ultimately, this is the only way to relax and let go and to calm our minds and lives. As we are aware of being driven by those cravings, positive or negative, we can make a choice to stay in those cravings or to let them go. This is what we learn in meditation: to let them go by directing the mind to where we want it to go. Having learnt it in meditation, this can carry over to the rest of our lives, allowing us to be calmer and less driven there, too. Meditation is the playground, but we're learning for life!

The way to deal with this hindrance is as before: to redirect the mind to the object of meditation. Breathe. As anger and hatred can be very strong, it may be necessary that you sit with them, witnessing yourself in your anger, your revenge fantasies, your accusations and endless tirades and arguments, before you can get back to the meditation object. If it is very strong, you may need to spend the rest of the meditation 'sitting in the fire'. Doing so will be very useful, as it will teach you a lot about how your anger works, what it does with you. Feel the physical effects, too, the tightness in the solar plexus, the fire in the belly, the tension in the body. Be compassionate with yourself. Feel the pain

and frustration underneath the anger. As you let yourself be in the anger and witness it at the same time, it will transform. Another traditional way to deal with anger, but rather challenging at first, is to develop loving kindness for the person you're angry with, i.e. to move from the belly and solar plexus to the heart: this is very healing and really transforms anger, but it is demanding. Don't forget kindness and compassion for yourself whilst also developing that for the other person. If you get angry, frustrated and judgmental with yourself, develop kindness and compassion with yourself. Do the first stage of the loving kindness meditation as your main form of meditation, especially if you find you have a tendency to just hate yourself for being such a ..., or so ... (fill in the gap).

5. Doubt is the last hindrance and one that really undermines even the desire to meditate, as it makes you question either the effectiveness of meditation, or your ability to meditate. If you have a tendency to doubt yourself and your abilities, you will encounter that tendency also in meditation, likewise if you have a tendency to be skeptical of everything and everybody. Practically, this can lead to a lot of indecision, as you will doubt any decision you want to take or have taken, including the decision to meditate. You will just want to stop meditating, or you won't ever get started.

The only thing you can do about this hindrance is to recognize it for its insidious nature: it undermines us in doing what we want to do. If you gave in to your doubts, you'd never do anything! You may want to take some time witnessing, sitting with doubt, feeling how it weakens your determination and resolve and involves you in endless mental argument or simply a kind of helpless paralysis. Ultimately the only thing to do about doubt is to disregard it: label it and set it aside and persist in meditating. Note that doubt can creep in if your expectations about meditation are too high (you expect to be able to be calm and focused every time) and you feel frustrated as a result. You may need to lower your expectations in this case and just continue practicing regardless of results. The ultimate antidote to doubt is the development of trust and faith – but this is demanding. In the meantime it would be good to tell yourself that meditating is a matter of continuing to practice, that you can't expect good results immediately (with some they take longer to materialize). Try to be as wholehearted as possible.

7 The two aspects of meditation: samatha and vipassana

Samatha means 'calm' or 'calming' and refers to the relaxation and mental stillness that meditation leads to. The need for calming is what brings most people to meditation, and it is the busy mind that most people contend with at the beginning. The calmer the mind, the more easily it moves into states of deep absorption and bliss / states of grace. As and when you do so, enjoy them whilst they last, but try not to hold on to them (which you can't in any case) or to reproduce them, as this will only produce frustration.

Let go of calmness or bliss as a goal you want to achieve: they happen, but you can't make them happen. All you can do is practice. As Jack Kornfield says, states of calm or bliss are like accidents, and meditation makes you accident-prone.

Once a mind is able to be more and more easily in the stillness, the second aspect of meditation can arise. Vipassana means 'insight'. Insight happens as the mind moves from the rational, left-brain, busy mode to the right-brain, intuitive, creative, calmer mode, but insight may also come as a flash. We may not be interested in insight to start with, but for all those who have spiritual questions or a spiritual practice, insight becomes an extremely valuable and often very deep experience. Like states of calm or bliss, insight cannot be made to happen, but you can invite it through a more contemplative meditation on a certain topic. Or you can simply welcome it as and when it happens. You recognize true insight by its simplicity, calmness and depth, and you will just know that you know.

Insight is traditionally seen as insight about the true nature of things, of the world, of God, of yourself, beyond the various illusions we are prone to. But it can also be insights about yourself, about actions you need to take, decisions you need to make, or simply about how you really feel about certain people or situations. Meditation can thus become a very valuable tool to get more in touch with ourselves, and to lead our lives on a more intuitive basis.

8 Meditation, contemplation, prayer, devotional practices

The boundaries between those activities are fluid and not very clear. Nor do they have to be, unless you're someone who has to know exactly what it is you're doing. My take on this is that all of these are extremely beneficial and have many of the same benefits as meditation, provided they are done in the right way. By this I mean that prayer has to be a listening rather than a demanding, a willingness to surrender to the will of God/the universe/the Light/the Source rather than asking for what we want; contemplation has to be a seeing and listening rather than a thinking and figuring things out in your head; devotional practices (chanting, saying ritual prayers such as Hail Mary or prayers from other faiths) have to be done with a pure heart. All of these practices can be done mindlessly or with a busy mind – they're closest to meditation when they come from the purity of the heart, i.e. a willingness to open and be in the heart, to see and feel with the heart, in any of these ways. It is also possible to move from one to the other or between them, e.g. to move between meditation and prayer or contemplation and meditation, or to move from chanting to meditation. Don't be too concerned about whether this is 'correct' – it's better to go with the flow of your heart. The only thing you need to be wary of is when you get too busy with trying too many things.

9 Books

There are a lot of books on meditation on the market. Many are written by Buddhists, as Buddhists have the strongest tradition and most experience with meditation. But there are also books from other authors, either non-denominational or from other traditions. I haven't done an extensive research, so all I can do is give you a small number of books which I have read and found good, helpful and inspiring. It's not an objective selection, though (if such a thing is possible)!

Thich Nhat Hanh, The Miracle of Mindfulness (Zen Buddhist)

Ayya Khema, When the Iron Eagle Flies, also Who Is My Self? (Theravadin Buddhist)

Jack Kornfield, A Path With Heart; also After the Enlightenment, the Laundry (Insight Meditation, Burmese Forest Tradition)

Sharon Salzberg, Loving Kindness (Insight Meditation)

Eddie and Debbie Shapiro, Meditation for Inner Peace (Hindu and Buddhist, not sure this is available in Canada)

Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginners Mind (Zen Buddhist)

Eckhart Tolle, The Power of Now (this is not about meditation, it's about being in the present, but very helpful anyway especially for those stressed out by spending too much time thinking about the past or the future)

If you're lost about where to start, start with Jack Kornfield's Path with Heart, he's very wise and helpful. Any of these books are written by major meditation teachers and helpful and inspiring in different ways. Let your intuition guide your choice.