

Meditation

“A man who knows others is wise; a man who knows himself is enlightened.” Buddhist proverb

From teaching many different skills, I have discovered that most people learn best if something is broken down into little steps. Let’s look at it like a person learning to walk. A child does not just stand up and begin to move about on two legs. It starts with discovering their legs, usually by kicking them about this way and that. Then they discover their feet and begin to play with them. Then they discover forward movement in the form of crawling. Next they discover how to stand up, even if another person or an object supports them. Eventually they put together the forward momentum and the standing up together and begin to walk. But their walking is only for short distances that grow longer and longer as they practice. But even as a person grows older, they can stumble and trip time to time.

The following is an outline that has proven to be successful for others to begin a journey. This is not the answer, but merely a possible way to find an answer. No one can give others what they seek, a person can only discover what they seek on their own.

Lesson 1: “A journey of a thousand mile begins with a single step.”

Be patient with you’re studies. They may take only a few days or a few months to understand. Most people want to start at the end, not the beginning. But now is the time to build a good foundation.

The first step is to get in the habit of sitting down. This will start with creating a small area that will be used each time a person meditates. This can be in a corner, against a wall, in a closet or somewhere else out of the way and where it can remain without being disturbed. The area should be considered a place of importance like a shrine or alter.

The alter should be placed on a low table. A milk crate turned up side down with a nice piece of cloth over it works great and is inexpensive. The area should have no more than three items that are of importance to the person. The first needs to be a candle. The other two are up to the individual.

Every day meditator should try to sit down in front of the shrine and light the candle. Then for no more that five minutes the student should just sit and watch the candle. No more, no less. The reason is to get use to the idea of sitting down, lighting the candle and being there each day.

Lesson 2: Just sit

We have been given a great organic machine to use for our duration on the planet. The problem is that most people don’t realize that it is even there. So now the focus of the meditation should include paying attention to several different aspects of the body.

This is done by first sitting down in front of the shrine and lighting the candle. Then the meditator works on sitting in a comfortable position. It is important that the meditator does not sit in a position that will result in discomfort over a long period of time, or will be a distraction. This can be on the floor, on a pillow or in a chair. Once a position is decided upon, then this should be the way in which the person meditates each time.

While in the seated position that has been chosen, it is important that the back is kept straight with the shoulders kept down and back and head erect. Slouching is not a good position for meditation. It closes the chest and makes it hard to breath. This can and will result in drowsiness and the possibility of sleep sneaking up on the person. Sleeping is not meditation.

The teeth should be kept lightly together and the tongue should be kept lightly touching the roof of the mouth just behind the teeth. This is done to keep the mouth moist throughout the time of meditation. It is also said that when the tongue is touching the roof of the mouth, a new conduit is created that allows Chi to flow better.

Lastly, a person must find a hand position that they will use each time that they sit down. Experimentation will result in finding a hand position that feels right. This can be anything from closed fists on the inner thighs, palms up and hands open on the knees, lotus hands, Buddha hands, or one that is made up. The hand position is not as important as what it symbolizes. For this, just like the sitting position, it is important to not change the position of the hands once decided upon.

This should be done for up to six minutes. No More and if possible, not less. The whole time, the eyes should be looking at the candle's flame. If the mind begins to wander away or if the eyes stop staring at the candle, then gently bring them back and continue. Do not judge and do not let this force you to stop. Just realize that focus has been lost, and refocus.

Chattering monkey of the mind

It is during this time that the battle for control over the mind begins. If a person is paying close attention, they will notice that their chattering monkey is trying to convince them that they must abandon what they are doing for other pursuits. It will try to get the person to go do the laundry, then get gas in the car, then call someone they have not even thought about in a long while and can even try to dissuade the person with very negative thoughts. The thoughts will often be random with little or no connection to the next thought that comes to mind. These are thoughts that a person should be aware about, but not give in to. In Buddhism, it is said that this is nothing more than the ego trying to defend itself for its own survival.

With time the mind will become quite. It can be a very sudden silence, as if there is nothing more the monkey can scream about and the mind will become very still. This may take a long time to achieve, and at first will only last for a very short length of time. But as a person continues to practice, it becomes easier.

Lesson 3: A leaf on a stream

The common belief is that it takes about a month of doing something for it to become a habit. This is true for most things and includes proper body positioning for meditation. When a person uses proper body mechanics in their meditation, it will slowly enter their everyday life.

At this point, the person meditating should have a ritual of sitting down in front of the altar, lighting a candle and getting into a position that is conducive for meditation. This act will also let the person as a whole know that it is time for meditation.

Once the physical focus has been practiced, then it is time to slowly start adding an inward gaze. So for the first three minutes the meditation should focus on the body. Then for three minutes the person should stare at the candle's flame. The person should let their mind go where it wants, and just watch. Do not judge the passing thought, do not follow or get caught up in any ideas as they pass by. But rather just observe them like a leaf on a stream.

Lesson 4: Focus

The next step is when it starts to get more difficult. Be patient. After time has passed and the practice of just watching the mind wander is comfortable, it is time to go to add the next exercise. At the very end, try to focus the mind and do not allow it to have free run anymore. Begin to bring it under control. At first, it will really be difficult. There will be many times that it

seems that the mind will want to rebel, that the chattering monkey will not allow there to be focus. But it is your mind, and now is when the monkey will be made to obey you.

Start with just a minute. Then try to add minute by minute in the coming weeks and months.

Some possible way to focus the mind is to find something for it to pay attention to. Everyone is different. People will have a slightly different way to focus that is good for them to meditate with. Here are several different ways that may work. Feel free to modify them as necessary, so long as the intent of focusing the mind is maintained.

- Visualization with a picture. This is done using a simple symbol picture, like the Mitsu-Dome. Stare into the middle of the picture as long as possible without blinking. Look at the picture and concentrate on it. When the eyes can no longer be held open, close them and concentrate on the burnt image on the back of the retina. Concentrate on the burnt image till it fades from view. Then reopen the eyes and refocus on the picture. Continue to concentrate on the picture, and do not let the mind wander. If it does, gently bring it back and refocus.
- Internal visitation. There are many different versions and variations to this exercise. One that has worked well is to visualize that there is a cavity in your chest. Inside rests your true self, the being that you truly are. However, they are obscured and hidden from view by a thick, oily cloud. Now as you breathe in, visualize that you are breathing in very clear, clean, clear air, and it mixes and very slightly dilutes the oily cloud. As you breathe out, you breathe some of that thick, oily air out of yourself and allow it to disperse into the atmosphere. Each time you breathe out, it clears the void even further. Continue to clear out the oily cloud with clear air until your true self can be seen very clearly. If your mind begins to wander from the task at hand, gently bring it back and continue.
- Use a Koan. These are sayings that have no answer, but allow the mind to focus on a possible answer. Several of the most common include: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” or “If a tree falls in the woods and no one is around, does it make a noise?” and the one I use is “What is the sound of water not falling?”
- Counting breaths. As you breathe in count 1, breathe out count 2, in 3 and continue this pattern until you reach 10 or until you realize that your mind has wandered away from counting. Either way, begin again at the beginning with breathing in and count 1. If it is boring to count in your native language, then try counting in a foreign language or even make up your own counting system.
- Square Breathing. Breath in for no more than 4 seconds, hold for no more than 4 seconds, breath out for no more than 4 seconds and hold for no more than 4 seconds then breath in and begin the pattern again. Each time, count the number of seconds of breathing in and holding. If it is boring to count in your native language, then try counting in a foreign language or even make up your own counting system. If your mind begins to wander away from the counting, restart and begin counting again.

Final thoughts

If what is here is something that can be used, please feel free to do so. If there is only a few things that can be used, pick them out and use them. If there is nothing here that can be used, then do not feel that there is any reason to do so.

Do not every feel that there is anytime that, should it be necessary, going back to an earlier lesson would be detrimental. It would be better to reinforce the foundation than to try to forge ahead. Forcing forward will not be beneficial, and can just lead to frustration and from there to quitting. This is not a contest and a person should realize that every time they sit to meditate, they are different from the time prior. As such, some days will be better than others. But do not allow this to be an excuse to not meditate, however. The only way meditating can work is to just sit down and do it.