
Setting up a Practice at Home

External Conditions:

There are a number of key external conditions that one can put into place to support a regular meditation practice at home.

The first is to **stay in touch with other meditators**. Through doing so we can learn new tricks, as others also come up against similar difficulties to us in their practice. Even just hearing that this is the case can be a relief! You are not on your own!

As well as this though, it is important to recognise that there will be a pull of inertia for most of us. We haven't been meditating for most of our lives so initially there might well be a resistance to starting something new, even if you know rationally that meditation is good for you. Parts of you may subconsciously know that continuing to meditate will change you and these parts may kick and scream at first! Hanging out with other meditators will support you in your efforts to move against the pull of habit and resistance to the new.

So stay in touch with the centre. There are a number of other evening classes that are open to you, as well as weekend events. In particular we recommend coming along to Monday nights if you are interested in Buddhism and the ideas behind the meditation course. In addition we run a follow-up course every few months. Do ask to be put on the mailing list so we can keep you informed.

Connected with this is to **go on retreat**. On retreat we set up near perfect conditions for ourselves to meditate. This means it is possible to go a lot deeper in one's practice than one might be able to do back in the city. Away from our usual distractions and environment, we can start to experience ourselves in a new way. Anything can seem possible!

Create a space at home for yourself as well. This might just be the corner of your room or somewhere else in the house. Many people find it useful to create a 'psychic space' that they associate with meditation. You might like to arrange some meaningful objects or images in front of you. What you are trying to do is to create an aesthetic space that puts you in touch with the desire to meditate. You might like to arrange some flowers, light some incense and a candle. The right atmosphere can help a lot.

Alternate the practices. You might feel tempted to just do the one you like. While understandable, it does mean you will only be developing one aspect of yourself. The two practices compliment each other – Mindfulness of Breathing gives you the concentration to do the Metta Bhavana, and the Metta Bhavana gives you a certain emotional warmth to take into the Mindfulness of Breathing. We recommend you alternate the practices so that you do the Mindfulness of Breathing one day and the Metta Bhavana the next.

Internal Conditions:

It is good to remember that we are always practising something! The types of mental states we habitually generate when not meditating will tend to be the ones we will experience when we sit on the cushion. Particularly if we reinforce these emotions through acting them out or by giving voice to them, we can reinforce these tendencies in ourselves.

So if we have been anxious and restless and a bit frenetic all day, when we sit to meditate we will probably find ourselves anxious and restless and unable to sit still! Or if we were irritable and snapped at somebody, chances are that we will still be grumpy and unhappy when we sit to meditate! Alternatively, if we have been in an open, friendly and creative mood that day, when we sit we will probably find it very easy to concentrate.

Buddhism traditionally recommends five principles on how to act in our lives. These ethical guidelines are not rules, but simply ways of acting, which, amongst other things, will aid our practice of meditation.

Loving-kindness / Not Causing Harm

The main idea here is to act on a basis of metta as much as possible when relating to others and the world around us. This might be as simple as trying to be helpful and friendly in your interactions with others! For some people it can extend to a concern for the environment, or becoming vegetarians.

Generosity / Not Taking Anything Not Freely Given To You

It is often said that the basic Buddhist virtue is giving. Even if you can't meditate, even if you are grumpy and irritable, you can always give! This also means being honest in our dealings with the world around us. Often we are tempted to 'fudge' issues: taking stationery from work, and thinking 'sure they make loads of money anyway, they won't miss these few bits and pieces!'. Being generous opens up our world and enriches us with a hidden wealth. Taking the not freely given leaves a bad taste in our mouths and separates us off a little bit more from others.

Contentment / Not Causing Pain Through Our Sexual Activities

Buddhism has no hang-ups with regard to sex, and whether people are married or not, straight or gay, monogamous or promiscuous.

It mainly encourages people to be happy with the state they have chosen. If single, be single, if married, be married. And avoid causing pain to others through your sexual activities.

Truthfulness / Not Lying

Here we are just encouraged to tell the truth! A simple one really, but often very difficult, sometimes requiring real courage e.g. sometimes we are tempted to make up some excuse for being late again! But it is probably better, if not easier, to simply acknowledge that we didn't get it together on time and just apologise and leave it there!

Mindfulness / Not Indulging In Intoxicants

Like all of these principles, there are no absolutes here. Buddhism simply says that if you have too much stimulating input, whether chemical or otherwise, it will affect your ability to be aware and mindful of yourself and others. This will mean

different things for different people – for some the amount of television they watch might be the issue, for others it might be getting drunk regularly! The main thing is to watch the effect on your levels of awareness of indulging in too much drink, drugs, TV, endless shopping, computer games...

This principle isn't about circumscribing pleasure – it is actually about noticing that many of these activities aren't that enjoyable, and that we might actually prefer it to be more quiet and mindful, doing something more creative!

Buddhism teaches that if we live according to these principles; being kind, generous, content, truthful and self-aware, we will feel naturally happy and free of regrets. And when we sit to meditate, feelings of joy and rapture will arise of their own accord, without any special effort. Not only this, we will find our minds clearing and calming with ease – concentration on the breath in a one-pointed way will become effortless.

Dhyana is the name traditionally given to these states of effortless concentration, of joy, rapture and one-pointedness. There are a number of them, but the first two are particularly interesting for us. An image that the Buddha used to describe the first dhyana is that of soap powder mixed with water so that the water is completely absorbed in to the powder, without any water left over, or any powder left over. In the context of meditation, it is as if one has become at one with the object of concentration, with the breath, or with metta.

The second dhyana he described in terms of a lake fed by an underground spring. It is as if some new energy is flooding into us, uplifting and inspiring.

As one becomes more and more concentrated more of these states of absorption continue to arise, each one more exalted than the previous.