

Sky Creek Dharma Center

Basic Meditation Instructions

Why meditate?

The purpose of meditation is to reduce suffering and increase happiness. Complete liberation from suffering is a fruit of what is called enlightenment. Meditation is one of the core practices leading to enlightenment. Over time, through your meditation practice you will deepen your insight into the causes of suffering and the causes of happiness. This deepening of insight is sometimes called "opening the wisdom eye."

The four noble truths: Shakyamuni Buddha taught four great truths, which can be thought of as the basic facts of existence. Understanding these truths is a very important foundation for your meditation practice.

1. Unsatisfactoriness: The first truth is that no matter how hard we try to make things perfect, there is an inherent unsatisfactoriness that we experience over and over again. We may think that a new job, home, or lover will create happiness and for a brief period it might. But inevitably the very thing that gave us some joy at first will become a part of our suffering. If you reflect on your experiences in life you will see that this is so. It is a universal experience. This first of the great truths is often called "The truth of suffering."

2. The Causes of Unsatisfactoriness: One of the Buddha's great insights was his penetrating realization of the causes of suffering. Each of us is capable of having the same insight. There are three of these causes. One is desire, or the tendency to grasp at things that we think will make us happier. The second cause is aversion, which makes us try to avoid things that we think will make us unhappy. Aversion often appears in our mindstreams as dislike, judgment, hatred, irritation, and so on. Both desire and aversion arise from the third cause, which is a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of ourselves and of reality, referred to as "delusion". This misunderstanding is the root of suffering. This second truth is often called "the truth of the origins of suffering." Together, desire, aversion, and delusion are referred to as "the three poisons."

3. The cessation of unsatisfactoriness: The Buddha discovered through his own efforts that suffering and the sense of unsatisfactoriness could be ended. In our meditation practice, each of us repeats this discovery when follow the path the Buddha discovered. We experience cessation through our own skillful and persistent efforts. Meditation is a cornerstone of those efforts. The third truth is generally referred to as "the truth of the cessation of suffering."

4. The path leading to the cessation of unsatisfactoriness: The Buddha described a path with eight elements that, if we follow it, will reliably lead us to enlightenment. Several of these elements have to do with meditation. The "eightfold path" includes:

1. Right View
2. Right Intention
3. Right Action
4. Right Speech
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration

While each element of the eightfold path is related to meditation, when we practice formal sitting meditation we are particularly cultivating the last three listed, which have to do with mental development. As we develop our minds in this way, we will begin to directly see how desire and aversion are present and active in our mindstreams. We will slowly become aware of the stories we tell ourselves about what is good and what is bad. We will see how our opinions and beliefs are ways in which our minds are constantly engaged in the game of grasping (desire) and pushing-away (aversion). And we will directly realize how this constant game perpetuates our sense of unsatisfactoriness.

When we become more experienced with meditation we will naturally become aware that our ideas about the nature of ourselves and reality have been faulty. A fundamental wisdom will begin to come forth; this wisdom will help us directly see the actual nature of existence. When this happens the causes of our suffering will be cut at the root.

The fourth truth in which the eightfold path is described is often referred to as "the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering."

Interdependence of ethical living and meditation: Our sitting meditation practice will not yield satisfactory results unless we simultaneously follow the other parts of the eightfold path. In particular it is essential to cultivate ethical living. When our behavioral choices are ethical, our meditation practice becomes more stable. As our meditation practice becomes more stable we develop better insight into how ethical choices are essential for our happiness and the happiness of others in our lives. When this insight appears we know that we are uncovering our innate wisdom.

We may be used to thinking that our behavioral choices define us as "good" or "bad" people, or perhaps "righteous" or "sinful." Buddhism has a different perspective. In Buddhism we have faith that we are all fundamentally of Buddha-nature, which means that our basic nature is pure, unstained, wise, compassionate, and blameless. Being ethical is therefore not about becoming a "better" person. It is instead about making skillful choices that will help us to realize and live according to our fundamental wisdom.

To understand the interdependence of meditation and ethical behavior, it is useful to think of them, along with wisdom, as being like three legs of a stool. If any one of the legs is removed, the stool becomes unstable. When we first begin our meditation practice, the legs of our stool may be very short and of unequal length: we lack mental stability, in large part due to patterns of making behavioral choices that led to more suffering. As we deepen our meditation practice and become more consistent in making ethical choices, the three legs of our stool slowly grow. We steadily become more stabilized in realization of our innate wisdom.

The five mindfulness trainings

A very useful guide to ethical conduct is found in the Five Mindfulness Trainings as articulated by Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hahn. Studying these Mindfulness Trainings helps us keep them firmly in mind. When we surrender our choices to the guidance of these trainings our happiness will certainly increase. Our meditation will become more stable and our insight will develop more rapidly.

1. *Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life*, I am committed to cultivating compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.
2. *Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression*, I am committed to cultivating loving kindness and learning ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I will practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.
3. *Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct*, I am committed to cultivating responsibility and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.
4. *Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others*, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am determined to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. I will not spread news that I do not know to be certain and will not criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I am determined to make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.
5. *Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption*, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental,

for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming. I will ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being, and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films, and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society, and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger, and confusion in myself and in society by practicing a diet for myself and for society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self-transformation of society.

Settings for Meditation

It is very helpful to meditate in a group setting. The energy of other meditators will help to stabilize and calm your own mind. Plus it is very helpful to self-discipline to be with a group that has a timekeeper, and that meets in a place that is specifically arranged for meditation.

Many of the ancients prescribed meditation in natural settings. It is a common experience that one's mind naturally settles and relaxes when we are in nature. When sitting by a stream or on a peak with a vast view, or next to a peaceful lake or in the sheltering shade of a forest, our minds are at home already. Simply holding still and breathing in these settings will eventually return your mind to a state of calm and clarity.

At home it is helpful to have a specific place set aside for meditation. It doesn't have to be much; just enough room for a cushion and perhaps a small shrine with a statue of Buddha and room for a candle and some incense. It may be helpful to choose the quietest location you can, and to arrange it so the light is muted.

How to Meditate

The Buddha taught four basic postures for meditation: sitting, walking, standing, and laying down. We will briefly discuss the first two of these postures.

Sitting meditation is where we learn the most about meditation in the beginning. As we become stable in sitting meditation we eventually learn to continue our meditation while walking. Later our meditation may begin to permeate all our activities, even when we are sitting or lying down.

There are several common ways to sit for meditation. The overall aim is that we should find a posture in which we can be still without either too much or too little comfort. Too much comfort may cause us to sleep; the capacity to be alert and maintain a vivid state of mind is important. Too little comfort causes unnecessary pain; it may keep us awake, but also develop an aversion to meditation. In some cases meditators have caused physical damage to their knees or other body parts; we definitely want to avoid that mistake.

In general, we find a posture where we are sitting erect; our spine has a slight natural curve. Our chins are slightly pulled in, and our head is erect, as if suspended by a thread from the crown. To counteract the tendency to salivate, we lightly rest the tip of our tongue on our palate just behind our front teeth. We adjust our butts, thighs, and feet so our balance is stable.

It's a good idea to test several of the standard sitting postures to find which ones work best for you. During long periods of sitting meditation you may want to shift from one position to the other periodically. It's good to be able to endure a moderate amount of discomfort so you don't shift so often that your meditation never becomes stable. But please don't feel it necessary to endure extreme pain.

The sitting postures listed below are illustrated in many guides. It's best to have an experienced meditator help you find them through experience. Ask them to show you each of these postures:

- ☐ Burmese on a round zafu cushion
- ☐ Seiza (kneeling) on a bench or zafu cushion turned on its edge
- ☐ Chair, sometimes with feet place on a raised surface such as a zafu cushion to keep the thighs parallel to the floor

- ❑ Gampa, a block-like sitting cushion developed specifically for westerners
- ❑ Half- or Full-lotus, not generally recommended for westerners

Most groups include periods of walking meditation between periods of sitting meditation. While walking we can continue to maintain our silence meditative state of mind. There are various approaches to walking meditation; some are slow, some are fast, some are done as a group and some are done alone. You will learn the approach used by the group(s) with which you sit.

Developing The Capacity for Calm Abiding: What to do with the mind while meditating

Don't expect your mind to "become empty" while meditating. While you will eventually come to realize the fundamental "emptiness" of your mindstream, that emptiness is not what you expect it to be. If you try to produce it, you'll just be trying to invent something that you have imagined, and the actual wisdom-nature of your mind is not only unlike anything you have imagined, but its very nature is beyond the imagination of our normal minds. So don't force anything; instead, let the fundamental clear light of your mind reveal itself naturally as a result of your meditation.

There are two aspects to meditation technique that are important to master: concentration (shamatha) and investigation (vipassana). Investigation depends on the ability to concentrate (which is to say, vipassana depends on shamatha), so we begin our meditation training by developing our capacity to concentrate. The type of concentration we are talking about is also called "calm abiding." It is a state where the mind is peacefully at rest; not, as the term "concentration" might apply, a state where we are tense with strained effort.

We generate calm abiding simply by resting our mind on a single object, referred to as the "object of concentration" or "the object of attention." In our basic meditation training, whether sitting or walking, we choose our breath as the object of our concentration.

The breath is a superior object of concentration for meditation because it is always present, and it occurs naturally without effort. Also, because it is experienced through our body, giving our breath our attention can help us shift away from preoccupation with mental images and thoughts.

Experiment with finding your breath in a particular location. The most common locations used by meditators are the tip of the nostrils, or the rising and falling of the belly. Once you have determined which of these locations you can attend to most vividly, commit to it and rest your mind there. Counting your breaths can help you keep your mind concentrated; on the inbreath count 1, on the outbreath 1, then 2, 2... and so on up to 10. Then you can start again.

At first you'll find that you get distracted and lose count, perhaps around 2 or 3. Or you may find yourself counting "15, 16..." which also means you were distracted. When this happens be very gentle with yourself; it's a totally natural and normal part of how our minds work. You can imagine that each thought or emotion or physical sensation that arises is like a leaf being gently carried on the surface of a stream. You are sitting on the bank of the stream; watch each leaf appear, notice it, notice your reaction to it: do you want to hang on to it? Are you uncomfortable with it and want to push it away? Let the leaf drift away on the stream. Don't push it away, but don't invite it in for tea either. Just notice its appearance, its abiding, and its cessation as it flows through your mindstream.

Maintain awareness of your breath all the way through. When you lose awareness, just gently place your attention back on your breath and begin counting again. Soon you will find that your capacity to rest your mind in a concentrated state of calm abiding is steadily improving.

Hindrances

You may start to experience frustrating hindrances as soon as your concentration improves. This is entirely normal. We'll discuss a couple of the common ones here.

When hindrances arise, what is happening is that the mind you are used to functioning with, which is the ego-mind, begins to recede and become less important in your mindstream. Ego-mind doesn't like this, and will begin to act up in interesting ways. You will have to call upon your reserves of determination and energy to work through these antics of ego-mind.

One of ego-mind's defenses is sleepiness. Our whole "normal" experience is, according to the teachings of Buddhism, much like a dream. Ego-consciousness produces this dreamlike state. That's its particular expertise. So you may find that your mind starts literally

dreaming and you fall asleep during meditation. When this happens you can try opening your eyes, raising the level of your gaze from the floor to a higher point, taking a few deep breaths, and even changing your position from (say) sitting to seiza (kneeling). Return your attention to your breathing.

A more advanced way of responding to sleepiness is to investigate the sleepiness by shifting your concentration to the nature of sleepiness itself, trying to see it for what it is--its fundamental nature--in a very penetrating and vivid way. This approach falls within the category of "investigation" and is characteristic of vipassana, rather than shamatha, meditation. Therefore it may be difficult or impossible to use this approach until you have cultivated a certain degree of capacity for concentrated calm abiding (shamatha).

Many meditators have found that in spite of their best efforts they may have a period of several weeks, months, or even years when sleepiness continues to be a hindrance to their practice. But through patient persistence it eventually ceases.

Another defense of the ego-consciousness during meditation is to become hyperactive. You may experience a vivid barrage of thoughts, of physical sensations, and of emotions. This activity will sometimes make you completely forget to try to concentrate. You may be lost in stories, fantasies, memories, fears, sensations for several minutes (even entire meditation periods). The antidote to this is, when you recognize what is going on, to simply label what your mind is up to: "thinking", "feeling", and then gently but firmly return your mind to your breathing.

Ego-mind will also appear as a well-intentioned tendency to try to change or control your immediate experience. You may judge your thoughts or feelings, or how you are experiencing meditation, and think, "this is bad, I must fix it." It's easy to get caught up in various self-improvement projects while sitting. But these projects are just another way ego has of hanging on. Instead of trying to manipulate the contents of your mind, just notice them. Be with them exactly as they are, having faith that because of your innate Buddha-nature all issues will resolve themselves favorably when viewed in the light of naturally-occurring penetrating insight. When you practice this "being-with-as-is" you are expressing a deep and profound self-acceptance. This self-acceptance is the basis of all compassion. It is an expression of your innate wisdom.

Vipassana: Developing Insight

Eventually you will develop the capacity to remain in a concentrated state of "being with as is" that allows you to investigate fully all the myriad appearances of your mindstream. This is the method of vipassana, or insight, mediation. Investigation means to turn your concentrated attention toward what has appeared in your mindstream. You do not lose touch with the awareness of your breathing, but you can let it recede to the background while the particular thought or sensation that has appeared comes to the foreground and receives the majority of your concentrated attention. Use this investigative attention to ask very basic questions about the experience: "what is the nature of this experience?" "From where did this experience arise?" "How does this experience unfold and cease?"

These questions will help you develop insight, which is synonymous with wisdom. You will begin to notice the impermanent nature of your thoughts and feelings and the sensations in your body. You will understand, "This thought is not me; it begins, it abides for awhile, it ceases." The same will be true of all the contents of your mindstream.

As your capacity for investigation grows you will naturally turn your attention to even more fundamental questions, such as: "If these thoughts are not me, if these feelings and the sensations of this body are not me, then who is experiencing this experience?" and "Without the meditator, who is meditating?" When you penetrate these questions you will come into the full flowering of wisdom and the realization of your true mind. You will, as the ancient masters said, smash Heaven and Earth and pluck the eyes from all the Buddhas of past, present, and future. You will "see your own original face before your parents were born."

Patience and Confidence

The amount of time that passes from when you begin meditation until you develop the skills for more advanced practices cannot be predicted in advance. It's not helpful to generate expectations about it; it may take many years, or you may wake up into your full wisdom immediately. Don't tell yourself stories about how it should or shouldn't be. Be confident that your Buddha nature will emerge. Just sit with determination and persistence and look directly into the matter for yourself.

Additional Notes

The Triple Gem and Taking Refuge

Buddhist often begin meditation by "Taking Refuge." We do this by mindfully saying (often while before a shrine where we have lit candles and incense),

*I take refuge in Buddha;
I take refuge in Dharma;
I take refuge in Sangha.*

This is an important foundation for our spiritual growth. Here's why:

Our meditation practice is supported by three important resources, called the "Triple Gem" or "Three Treasures." These are The Buddha, The Dharma, and the Sangha.

The Buddha refers to the historical Buddha, the lineage of enlightened teachers who have carried the Dharma to our time, and our own inherent Buddha Nature.

The Dharma refers to the teachings of the Buddha and the wisdom that ripens as a result of our practice. It encompasses Buddhist concepts and the entire range of "skillful means" that guide our practice. Meditation and ethical living, as briefly outlined above, are among those skillful means.

The Sangha traditionally refers to the communities of monks and nuns who dedicate their lives to the practice of buddhadharma, and to whom lay Buddhists can turn for guidance and support. The term "Sangha" has also come to mean any organized group of practitioners, such as the meditation groups that meet at Sky Creek Dharma Center.

It is important to cultivate one's connection with each of the Gems.

We connect with the Buddha by developing a relationship with a qualified teacher, attending retreats, and honoring our own innate Buddha nature.

We connect with the Dharma by studying texts about what the Buddha taught, participating in discussion groups, and living

ethically, and diligently practicing meditation and the eightfold path.

We connect with the Sangha by participating in group meditation, attending retreats, and organizing our social relationships to maximize the amount of time we spend with spiritual friends who are on the same path.

These ways of connecting are referred to as "Taking Refuge." To escape past patterns of unskillful living and accumulation of suffering and the causes of suffering, we take refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

Many traditions outside of Buddhism include meditation practices that are similar to those in Buddhism. One of the things that makes Buddhist meditation specifically Buddhist is that we meditate in the context of the three refuges.

The Bodhisattva Vow and Dedication of Merit

In Buddhism there is a tradition of dedicating the merit of one's practice to benefit all beings. This arises from the "Bodhisattva ideal," which is a decision to practice Buddhism not just for our own liberation from suffering, but on behalf of all sentient beings. This is in contrast to the goal of liberating only oneself from suffering.

Two practices related to this that are common in meditation groups are chanting the Bodhisattva Vow and, at the end of meditation, chanting a Dedication of Merit.

The exact forms of these chants varies from group to group. The examples below are provided so you can understand better what the intention is behind the chants.

The Bodhisattva Vow:

*Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to awaken them.
Desires are inexhaustible; I vow to put an end to them.
Dharma gates are countless; I vow to enter them.
The Buddha way is unsurpassable; I vow to embody it fully.*

Dedication of Merit:

*May the merits of this practice
benefit all beings
throughout space and time.*

Meditation Hall Etiquette

- ☐ Please remove your shoes before entering the meditation hall.
- ☐ Some traditions encourage you to bow when entering and leaving the meditation hall.
- ☐ In general, the meditation hall is a place to be quiet.
- ☐ During discussion times avoid point the soles of your feet toward the shrine.
- ☐ Treat dharma texts respectfully.
- ☐ Each group has their own way of moving through their time in the meditation hall; when you are new to a group just watch and follow along.
- ☐ Some groups permit tea or food in the meditation hall during discussion times. Eat and drink mindfully.
- ☐ The practice of Dana is an important part of Buddhist training. Dana means giving of your resources: time, money, energy, wisdom. When placing money in the Dana bowl you may wish to silently say to yourself a dedication:

I joyfully dedicate the merit of this gift to the liberation of all beings.

This document is dedicated to the liberation and happiness of all beings throughout space and time.