

Meditation – postures and practices

An introduction to three different meditation techniques

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By Khun Reinhard

<https://www.khunreinhard.com>
KR.emailcontact@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Buddhism distinguishes basically between concentration and insight meditation. Another very useful form of mental development is loving kindness meditation. These three techniques are very beneficial in everyday life and help to live a more peaceful and content life.

It is recommended to take part in a meditation course, best in form of a seven or ten day retreat, to learn a technique properly and to get in contact with an experienced meditation teacher who is able to answer questions, to solve problems and to dispel doubt.

This article is a modified excerpt from my book “Introduction to Buddhism and to Buddhist Meditation”. More details regarding different meditation techniques are provided there.

1.1 Attitude

It is very important to take your time for your meditation session. Do not hurry, thinking of what to do after the session is over before you have actually started. Relax body and mind. Forget about your work, your family, your commitments and responsibilities, your childhood, etc. Do not look ahead; do not worry about the future, not even about the near future. In this way you carry no burden, you become open to the present moment. Thus you get rid of stresses and experience more relaxed, calm and peaceful states of mind.

Then it's best to not expect anything. Just sit back and see what happens. Do not become the “doer” of the practice, do not get obsessive about it, and do not force anything. Take your time and be patient. Anything really valuable takes time to develop. Do not cling to any pleasurable experience and do not reject any disturbing ones. Do not fight with what you experience, just observe it.

The right attitude towards the practice is to observe, to get to know all your states of mind. Your desires, your hopes and fears, your ambitions, your anger, your boredom, your doubts, your self-righteousness... Try to understand and experience how and why they arise, see all of them cease. And once you really know and understand them, you can let go of them. Letting go means to allow things to go, not to get rid of them, not to suppress, deny, reject or run away from them. You can allow them to go because you start to understand their nature, you know that they have arisen, and you will see them fading away of their own accord. Nothing stays in the mind forever, not the things we like, not the things we dislike.

1.2 Posture

When we think of meditation in the west, we may think of somebody sitting in the lotus posture. The lotus or diamond posture may be the final goal for some meditators, but most of us have to choose some other cross-legged or non-cross-legged sitting posture due to stiffness and inflexibility in our hips and groins.

The purpose of all the sitting postures is

- to have a stable and secure feeling in the body so that there is no need to focus on or pay attention to the balance;
- physical immobility which in turn aids mental stability which is also known as concentration;
- the ability to sit for a long time without moving (may be hard to believe for beginners).

Cross-legged sitting postures

- **Tailor's squat**
- **Burmese style** (lower legs one in front, not on top of the other)
- **¼ lotus** (one foot is resting on the opposite lower leg)
- **½ lotus** (one foot is resting on the opposite thigh)
- **Full lotus** (both feet are resting on the opposite thighs)



Burmese style

Left : Front view
Right: Side view



Half lotus

Kneeling bench



Pay attention to:

- Legs and feet
- Buttocks (use cushion, sit at the front edge, tilt the cushions slightly forward towards the feet)
- Knees (below the hips and on the mat if possible)
- Back (straight, vertebrae like a staple of coins)
- Shoulders (relaxed and slightly rolled back)
- Arms and hands (hands rest on the knees or in the lap about two inches underneath the navel, palms facing up, wrists touching the thighs. Arms not too close to the body, allow some space between elbows and body, this is more relaxed and cooler as well. There are no mudras in Theravada Buddhism). Experiment a little.
- Neck (straight and relaxed)
- Head (may slightly drop forward)
 - Mouth closed, lips are gently touching each other, tongue slightly pressed against the upper palate and the tip against the back side of the front teeth
 - Eyes (closed or slightly open, when open gazing along the nose at the floor)
- Breathing (abdomen and chest, long, deep and forced at the beginning but not too long at a time)
- Clothes (comfortable, not tight, no thick material, no restriction of blood flow or pressure on nerves, loosen belt)

Very important with any sitting or standing meditation posture is to keep the spine straight in order to allow an easy and unrestricted flow of air in and out of the lungs. Much of the rest is of secondary interest, especially for people with some bodily problems.

Physical discomfort

All the explained methods and aids will not prevent you from experiencing bodily pain. Everyone does, no matter which posture is chosen and how experienced one is. Sooner or later the discomfort will arise, in our knees, back, shoulders ...

What to do about it?

- Get mindfully into the posture, spend some time to do so and check if everything is o.k., relax into the posture, do not sit tensed and stiff.
- Check and relax your posture from time to time during each sitting period.
- You do not have to sit like a rock without movement (Zen-Buddhist's do) You may change your posture, but please do not change immediately. Watch your mind how it deals with this unpleasant feeling, how it wants to get away from it. Endure a little pain otherwise you won't be able to sit comfortably for extended periods of time, **but**
- be gentle with yourself, do not sit with excruciating pain, find the middle way. When you have reached a condition where you need to change the posture, do it slowly and mindfully.

2. Meditation techniques

2.1 Concentration meditation

Buddhism acknowledges 40 different meditation objects like colored disks or different parts of the body which includes the breath. I'm familiar with the breath as meditation object and this is why I describe it here.

The aim of concentration meditation is to keep the attention on this meditation object only (or as much as possible). The breath is just one possible meditation object. It has several advantages, the main one may be its availability; we can use it any time anywhere without the need for extra preparations and this is why it is used frequently.

We want to be aware of the sensations the breath causes along its way in our body. At first we let the breathing go comfortably and naturally without influencing it. When we inhale the air enters the nose. We can be aware of this at some point at the inner skin of the nose, the nostrils or the upper lip. If you have difficulties to find the point of touch, you may breathe forcefully for a couple of breaths. Then the air travels along the upper palate and the throat into our lungs (which is difficult to be aware of) and we will notice that our chest widens and the belly rises. Then there is a gap between in- and exhalation and when we start exhaling, we are aware of the abdomen sinking back, the chest deflating and then we will notice the sensation the airflow causes at our nose. Again there is a gap between ex- and inhalation and then the next inhalation will begin and so on and so on. If you are not familiar with abdominal breathing or your belly will not move at all, be aware of the movement of your chest instead. This technique is called 'following' the breath.

Of course it is possible to stay at the nose or at the abdomen (chest) all the time during each in- and exhalation, actually staying at the nose all the time is a recommended technique for more experienced

meditators, but by initially ‘following’ the breath, it is easier to stay with the breathing without having the mind starting to drift away frequently.

That’s it for the start – this is the basic technique, nothing more to do. We concentrate on our breathing, want to be mindful of it continually, breath after breath; the breath is our meditation object.

We start with being mindful of one breath, one in breath and then one out breath, and then of the next in breath and so on. In due course your concentration will grow and we may be able to increase the time we can focus on the breath. If the mind wanders away, we gently, without judging or condemning ourselves, without regarding us as hopeless meditators, will bring it back to the breath, again and again. Our aim is to notice quicker and quicker when we’ve lost our meditation object and then gently bring it back to the breath as soon as we notice that we’ve gone astray.

Sharon Salzberg, an American meditation teacher says in her book *Loving Kindness. The revolutionary art of happiness*. “Beginning again and again is the actual practice, not a problem to be overcome so that one day we can come to the ‘real’ meditation.”¹

After some time we then should be able to stay with the breath for increased periods of time and once we are able to do that, we are ready to refine the mode of observation in order to reach deeper stages of concentration. We now can reduce the area of observation and focus our attention exclusively on that point at the nose area where we feel the airflow touching the skin. Once we can stay here without losing contact with the breath, our concentration and mindfulness may be sufficiently developed to switch to insight meditation.

In his book *Breath by breath* Larry Rosenberg gives the following advice regarding the appropriate time to switch from concentration- to insight meditation:

“It is helpful to put the *nivaranas*, the hindrances, into abeyance: sensual desire, restlessness, sloth, anger, and doubt, five states that obscure the natural radiance of the mind. That isn’t to say, of course, that they will never come up again, but that the meditator will recognize them and be able to come back to the present moment.

Often when a meditator is having trouble concentrating on the breathing, it is one of these hindrances that is bothering him or her. If it keeps interrupting, it can be helpful to switch to the hindrance itself, give it the attention it is demanding while maintaining a light contact with the breathing. This isn’t to think about the hindrance, or get lost in it, but to observe it with mindfulness. The breath is still in the background, of course, helping you remain attentive. When the hindrance is weakened, you can come back to the breath as an exclusive object.”² Once your attention is restored, you can try to go on with insight meditation.

If you can spend only 30min. daily for your mental development, you may find it difficult to reach even this level of calmness. In this case you may start each session with concentration meditation in order to relax, calm down, develop some concentration and then, may be after 10 to 15min, one may switch to insight meditation for the rest of the session. It makes not much sense to switch back and forth between concentration- and insight-meditation during one session.

Tip

When you start your meditation session and your mind is very restless, jumping all over the place, you can start with intentionally deep breathing, you can even breathe strong and forcefully in order to tie the mind to the breath. Do so for a few minutes only and then leave the breathing alone, just observe it. The

¹ Sharon Salzberg, *Loving Kindness. The revolutionary art of happiness*. Shambala, Boston & London 1997, ISBN: 1-57062-176-4 (pbk.), page 82

² Larry Rosenberg, *Breath by Breath*, Shambala Classics, Boston 2004, ISBN 978-1-59030-136-4, page 154

breath will then naturally become longer and more refined, but may finally, with increasing concentration become short and shallow, may be even to a point where it is hardly noticeable.

2.2 Insight- or vipassana meditation

A certain amount of concentration is necessary in order to start with insight meditation.

During concentration-meditation we've tried to focus on one object only, on our breathing, have tried to exclude everything else that we've become aware of, have treated everything else as distractions. In *vipassana* or *insight* meditation we now open up to everything that attracts our attention, that is happening in and to our body and mind. We do not try to exclude other things anymore.

The idea is to open up to everything and see the three characteristics: (unsatisfactoriness, impermanence, not-self) in everything. Our main focus should be on seeing, better experiencing, impermanence everywhere, because that's the easiest to see of these three characteristics and realizing the other two characteristics will follow naturally out of realizing impermanence.

Why are we looking for impermanence, and where exactly should we look for it? We are looking for impermanence to allow the mind to let go of all the things it is chasing after because this constantly chasing after things, clinging to them, is what causes our problems. Intellectually this concept of impermanence isn't difficult to understand, we know it already, but the mind is unable to take the necessary steps out of misery unless it really has experienced impermanence.

What we are looking for is to experience impermanence and we do not have to go far to do so. We will experience impermanence in our:

- **Body.** By now we are familiar with our breathing: We breathe in and out, every breath is different in length, in texture, in depth... There is nothing permanent in the process of breathing. Then be aware of the sensations in your body. Having done some concentration training, it is easy to be aware of bodily sensations everywhere in the body, eg there will be always some pulsating, tingling, itching, in the body (this is what is done in 'Goenka'-Vipassana Retreats). Pain is not just a solid heavy lump of pain. It may be pulsating, burning, moving, be strong ... Whatever sensation you experience, it changes, it never stays the same, it fades away, is impermanent. It is helpful to check the body in a systematic way (e.g. face, neck, upper arms, lower arms, hands ...) in order to become aware of more subtle sensations as well.
- **Feelings.** Feeling here is not a mood or an emotional state, like anger for instance, it is just a bare feeling tone of positive, negative or neutral. A loud noise may be regarded as unpleasant, a bodily sensation as pleasant, and there may be indifferent or neutral feelings as well. None of them will stay, they all will fade away.
- **Perceptions.** Whatever we become aware of during our meditation session, the mind will label it. Perception is rising and falling with every meaningful sense-contact. Our memories – they get created, they are accessible for some time and then they are lost. And who wants to claim that their memories are always recalled correctly?
Once we get some experience with the practice, we will be able to only hear when hearing without perception telling us "That is the sound of a car" for example.
- **Thinking process.** Thoughts and emotions come and go. Thoughts are very quick and difficult to observe. It's easier to watch states of mind like agitation, boredom, calmness etc. Observe this ceaseless

flux of different states of mind. We do not invite them, they come of their own accord, they leave of their own accord as long as we do not cling to them.

- **Consciousness.** We become aware of different contacts during our sitting period. Mostly it will be ear-contact when hearing something, body-contact when we are aware of some bodily sensation or mind-contact when thinking. If we sit with eyes closed there is not much to see and usually there is not much to smell or taste. Each time our attention switches, a different, always new consciousness is at work, arising, being aware for a brief period of time and then fading away.

So in *vipassana* meditation we stay with everything that attracts our attention for as long as this experience lasts (eg the noise of a passing car on the street) or until another experience becomes stronger (draws our attention towards it) than the previous one. We do not regard other experiences than the breath as distractions; we do not go back to the breath as in concentration meditation.

Another possibility is to contemplate impermanence. To contemplate means to reflect on something in a very concentrated way or to observe with a one-pointed mind, to investigate into phenomena from different viewpoints. We can contemplate for example the life-cycle of a leaf or tree when we see a leaf falling from a tree: There is a seed, a young plant develops, it grows over many years, bears fruit, grows old and dies, impermanence. Or we contemplate our own life (first memory, childhood, youth, adulthood, we grow older, will get sick and die eventually).

Wherever we pay attention to, we will see and experience impermanence and by doing this we'll recognize the inherent unsatisfactory nature of everything we know. How can something be genuine fulfilling if it doesn't last, if we experience it only temporary before leaving us with a sense of lack or loss? Finally the mind will realize: Wherever I pay attention to, nothing stays, everything fades away. So why run after things, why put so much effort into chasing after pleasurable experiences or run away from disagreeable ones? They are impermanent anyway. Nothing is really worth chasing after, it makes no sense to cling to things or events because they will not last, they will fade away. The pleasure I get from them already carries its disintegration - our attachments begin to fade away, our problems will diminish accordingly.

2.3 Loving kindness meditation

The purpose of doing loving kindness meditation is to develop friendliness and wishes of well-being towards all sentient beings, including yourself. It is the method of choice to lessen animosity and anger; the sense of self, selfishness will decrease. It promotes patience, tolerance, gratitude and a forgiving heart. Usually it goes together with developing compassion and sympathetic joy. Loving kindness meditation has nothing to do with that sentimental "I love you all and everybody is just wonderful", but it sees very clearly the positive and negative aspects of oneself and others. It brings about positive attitudinal changes as it systematically develops the quality of loving acceptance.

Loving kindness meditation is done by focusing on a person or a group of persons, reflecting on their qualities and sending good will, sympathy and friendliness to them. In the Buddhist scriptures there is an order of persons given one may follow when practicing this kind of meditation:

- You yourself.
- A respected, beloved person like a (spiritual) teacher or benefactor.
- A close friend, a person who is dear to you.
- A neutral person (somebody you know but you have no special feelings towards, e.g. a person who serves you in a shop).
- A person who has given you some difficulties, who may have hurt you or is difficult to bear.

- Finally you may extend your loving kindness and compassion to all living entities and let it pervade the whole universe.

The favorite person to start with is you yourself because only when you are at peace with yourself will you be able to develop friendliness and loving kindness towards others. Then systematically sending loving kindness from one type of person to the other in the above given order will have the effect of breaking down barriers between yourself and the other four types of people.

There are countless variations of doing loving kindness meditation, no fixed forms or phrases, and of course, there are the traditional ways of practicing it as well. So what will be introduced here is just one way of doing it. For those with keen interest in this kind of meditation I recommend the already mentioned book by Sharon Salzberg (see footnote 1 on page 5).

We start with finding a comfortable meditative posture. We'll close our eyes and focus our attention on the breath for some time to become calm and concentrated. [60sec.]

In the beginning of this practice some people might have difficulties in developing the feeling of loving kindness, to experience the actual emotion of loving kindness. As a preliminary exercise try to imagine a young pet, a little dog or cat as it is playing in its clumsy way or try to imagine a baby or little child as it is smiling at you. Nobody would do any harm to these little beings, there is only care and well-wishing. The emotion that normally now arises in your mind is the feeling of loving kindness we are looking for.

Now imagine the kindly shining sun that radiates its energy, both rays of light and warmth towards all things, living or nonliving, to all human beings of all races and religions in all parts of the world without preference or prejudice. [30 to 60sec.]

Now imagine yourself as this lovely shining sun with all loving kindness as its energy and start radiating the loving kindness as the sun does with its rays of light and warmth. [30 to 60sec.]

To yourself (not easy for some)

Now bring up an image of yourself that you can recall best. []

[] means to take a few seconds, not necessarily 30 to 60sec.

Try to see yourself smiling at you. []

Now slowly repeat these words in your mind:

- May I be happy and well.
- May I be far away from troubles and dangers.
- May I live happily in peace.

Before you repeat the loving kindness phrases (May I be ...) you can reflect on your life in order for loving kindness to arise more easily:

Reflections:

- a) Think of yourself as a fragile living being, so easy to get hurt, even by a single word; think of yourself as a living being struggling for life as all the others; think of your fears, doubts, uncertainties. [30 to 60 sec.] Or alternatively:
- b) Look at yourself, think of some wholesome actions you have performed in the past, may be as you've helped or brought some joy to another person; look at some of the positive deeds you've performed and look as well at some of the less positive actions but do not condemn yourself because of them.
Can I accept the way I am?
Can I make friends with my so called weaknesses and short-comings? [30 to 60 sec.]

Common phrases:

Before we continue with the other groups of persons, I will give some common phrases used in loving kindness meditation. Choose whichever you find appropriate, invent your own phrases. Three or four phrases are enough, no need to use all of them every time.

- May ... be happy and well (... = I or you or, he, she, they, we)
- May ... be safe and warm
- May ... be far away from troubles and dangers
- May ... not be parted from the good fortune ... have attained
- May ... live (exist) happily in peace
- May ... have mental happiness
- May ... have bodily well-being
- May ... be able to understand and to cope with the difficulties and challenges of life
- May ... be able to let go of anger, fear, worry and ignorance
- May ... be free from resistance (to develop loving kindness towards myself)
- May ... be open to life
- May ... experience peace
- May ... be free from all suffering

To a respected person

Now bring up an image of one of your teachers or of a person you've learned from or of somebody who is or was benevolent to you. []

Reflection: (You can do with or without)

Our teachers or benefactors are the ones who teach us skills or help us in some other way so that we can make living easier, that we are able to deal in a more skillful way with the difficulties and challenges of life. They too deserve our loving kindness. [30 to 60 sec.]

Then slowly repeat these words in your mind: → Common phrases

To our parents (can be difficult for some)

Now bring up an image of your parents. []

Reflection: (You can do without)

Our life is possible because of gifts from our parents. They gave birth to us, took good care of us until we were grown up. They gave us good education and knowledge to prepare us for successful lives. What has caused their gifts? It's their love and care which has always filled their hearts, ready to pour out for us. Even we have grown up until now – their love and care has never ended. We would like to give our loving kindness to them.

Then slowly repeat these words in your mind: → Common phrases

To somebody who is dear to us

Bring up an image of somebody who is dear to you, preferably not a spouse or mate, wife or husband because of the risk that the near enemy of loving kindness, lust, can be aroused.

Reflection: (You can do without)

Reflect on how he or she is supporting you, how he or she is encouraging you, how you are being happy together, and at times, when we are doing wrong, will forgive each other. []

We would like to give our loving kindness to them. Expand your loving kindness until you reach the image of your friend and then slowly repeat these words in your mind: → Common phrases

To a neutral person

May be someone who serves you in a shop, a colleague ...

To people who gave us some difficulties (best not to start with your greatest enemy)

Recall an image of a person who has given you some difficulties or who has hurt you or someone who is hard to endure, hard to bear. []

Reflections: (Best not to be done without)

- This person is struggling for life as I do. (You will call the person by his/her name if you know it).
- This person makes mistakes as I do.
- He/she has to deal with his/her anger, fear uncertainties, wrong views as I have to.
- He/she tries to overcome greed, hatred, delusion as I try.
- By following his/her way of life as I'm following my way of life, he/she has given me another perspective of life to learn.
- He/she has shown me some of my weak points so that I can improve myself.

I will forgive him/her as other people have forgiven me and radiate my loving kindness to him/ her. []
→ Common phrases

To all beings

Bring your attention back to yourself. Feel your heart filled with loving kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy.

Now extend your loving kindness to:

- Your family and friends.
- All people in your home town.
- All people in your home country.
- All people on your continent.
- Extend your loving kindness to all human beings of all races and religions without prejudice.

Extend your loving kindness further to:

- All animals (mammals, birds, insects, fish, reptiles and mosquitoes).
- All plants (trees, flowers, crops, herbs and weeds).
- The mountains, forests, rivers and oceans.
- The moon, the other planets, the sun the stars.
- Extend your loving kindness to the whole universe. []

Then slowly repeat these words in your mind: → Common phrases

Other possible receivers of our loving kindness may be people with difficulties and/or suffering like victims of natural catastrophes or wars, people in jail or with diseases ...

If you have plenty of time or like to do so, you may dedicate a whole sitting to loving kindness meditation and spread your loving kindness systematically to all kind of persons in the given order. If your time is limited to a few minutes at the end of your regular meditation session, choose just one or two groups of persons. You can do with or without the offered reflections; feel free to invent your own ones. Do not forget to include yourself and your enemies (if any) or people who have given you some difficulties.

