

Welcome to the Port Townsend Sangha

These few pages are intended to offer support in learning how to meditate. In addition, below is a list of some books and online resources with other supporting materials that may be useful.

The Sangha also has created a mentoring program should you have questions or desire further support. If you wish to meet members prepared to share their experience and training, contact us at ptsangha@gmail.com

Learning to Meditate Part I: Establishing a Daily Sitting Practice

Before you sit:

As with all things, start where you are. You have everything you need right now. First, decide to sit each day. Next, plan the time, place and duration for your sitting meditation.

Choose a time:

Morning is often best for some people who find meditation to be a beneficial way to begin the day. However, the best time is the time that you can commit on a regular basis. If one longer sit isn't possible, try two shorter ones.

Choose a space:

There is no perfect place. If possible, dedicate a space exclusively to your daily sitting. Choose a relatively quiet space where you can leave your cushion (or chair) so that it is always there to return to.

You may want to create an altar with a candle, inspiring photos or statues. These are not necessary, but for some people are beneficial and motivating.

Choose a duration:

Planning to sit as long as is comfortable, plus 5 minutes, can be a useful guide. It is not a rule. Even fifteen or twenty minutes will seem an eternity in the beginning, but that impression will change with time. If you sit each day, over time, you may notice positive impacts such as less reactivity and increased calm.

Every time you sit:

Set your intention. It is helpful to recall at the start of each sitting meditation why you are doing it.

Set your posture:

Alertness is one of the two essential ingredients in meditation. Sit on a chair, cushion, or kneeling bench as straight and tall as possible.

In the beginning, sitting against a wall can help you learn what a straight back feels like. Around this straight-back position, let the rest of your skeleton and muscles hang freely. Let the hands rest comfortably on your knees or lap. Lower your gaze, bringing the attention inward.

Relax deeply:

Openness is another essential ingredient. Once you feel your spine is erect and settled, let everything else relax, hang loose, and soften.

Breathing through the nose, loosen the face, neck, hands, and stomach area. You may want to begin at the scalp and move your attention slowly downward, methodically relaxing and softening each part of the body.

Please don't skip the step of relaxing/letting go! Consciously releasing body tension will help you open to whatever arises during your meditation.

Choose an object of meditation:

Once you've established this alert and open posture, you are ready to place your attention on the object of your meditation. Useful objects for beginners are:

The breath as it enters and leaves the nostrils;
Other body changes during breathing, e.g., the rise and fall of the chest or abdomen;
Sounds as they arise from within the body or outside of it;
Other body sensations as they arise.

Whatever object you select, stay with it for at least 10 breaths. Even with effort, your mind will insist on going to other places. Note this when it happens, and gently lead your attention back to the chosen object of meditation.

Your intention and persistence are the key ingredients for cultivating awareness, not the number of times your mind wanders.

As often as you need to, check yourself: Alert and erect? Relaxed and open?" and begin again.

Learning to Meditate Part II: Common Issues for Meditators

The monkey mind:

At first, you may be surprised at how active and uncontrolled your mind is. Don't worry - you are discovering the truth about your current state of mind.

Accept and "sit with" whatever comes up. Don't try to change it by force, use patience.

Sit up, relax, and gently bring your attention back again and again to the object of your meditation.

It is common to confuse thinking and meditating. It takes practice to recognize pleasant, dreamy thoughts as being different from having your attention connected to the changing experience of this moment. Staying focused on the body/breath is a good way to stay grounded in the present.

The Hindrances. The classical five hindrances to practice are:

Grasping: Wanting more (or something different) from what's present right now.

Aversion: Fear, anger, any form of pushing away.

Restlessness: Jumpy energy, agitation.

Sloth and torpor: Sleepy, sinking states of mind and body.

Doubt: A mind-trap that says, "it's no use, this will never work, maybe there's an easier way".

Meditators experience all of these states. During sitting practice, if you notice one of the hindrances arising, it is useful to name it silently to yourself, e.g., "grasping, grasping" or "sleepy, sleepy".

If it is strong, try not to pull away from the difficult energy, but bring all of your attention to it.

Let yourself experience it fully through the sensations in your body, neither getting lost in it, nor pushing it away.

Watch the hindrance without expectations. When it dissipates, return to the primary focus of your meditation. As Ven. Henepola Gunaratana encourages in *Mindfulness in Plain English*: “Examine [the hindrances] to death”. When you clearly see the suffering created by grasping and aversion, you will naturally start to let them go.”

Learning to Meditate Part III: Sustaining a Practice

Here are a few helpful hints for sustaining your sitting practice:

Sit every day, even if it's for a short period.

A few times during each day, establish contact with your body and breath. Remember that everyone wants to be happy, just like you.

Practice regularly with a group or a friend.

Use inspiring resources such as books or audiotapes of dharma talks.

Study the Dharma, for example the 4 Noble Truths, the Noble 8-Fold Path.

Sign up for a retreat - one day, a weekend, or longer. The experience will deepen your practice.

If you miss a day, a week, or a month — simply begin again.

If you need guidance, ask for help from an experienced meditator or teacher.

Additional Resources

Books with Introductions to Meditation Practice:

It's Easier Than You Think: The Buddhist Way to Happiness. Sylvia Boorstein, 1995

Loving Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness. Sharon Salzberg, 1995

The Meditative Path: A Gentle Way to Awareness, Concentration, and Serenity. John Ciani, Jack Kornfield, 2003

Seeking the Heart of Wisdom. Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, 1987

Mindfulness in Plain English. Ven. Henepola Gunaratana, 1991

Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life. Jon Kabat-Zinn, 1994

The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation. Thich Naht Hanh, 1975

Mindfulness with Breathing. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu

Websites with audio teachings

Dharma Seed: <http://www.dharmaseed.org/>

Seattle Insight Meditation Society: <http://seattleinsight.org>

Insight Meditation Community of Washington, D.C: <http://imcw.org>

Insight Meditation Center <http://www.audiodharma.org/>

Links to other sites:

Insight Meditation Society Cloud Mountain Retreat Center Spirit Rock Meditation Center

<https://www.dharma.org/> <http://www.cloudmountain.org/> <http://www.spiritrock.org/>