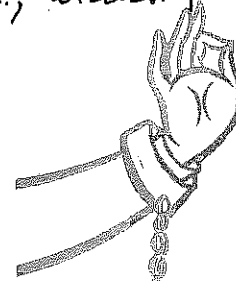


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II. MEDITATION

MEDITATING IN PRISON is challenging. Slamming gates, loudspeakers throughout the day, piercing screams, random violence, cellmates, and inquisitive guards are not conducive to finding a time and place for silent introspection. Although it might seem that only accomplished meditators could overcome these obstacles, the fact is that thousands of people have learned how to meditate in prisons throughout the world.

In fact, it is precisely because of the difficulties and challenges that Buddhist practice and incarceration are an ideal combination. Everyday distractions and temptations are fewer in prison. There is an abundance of time available to practice. The stress and pressure of prison can act as teachings and an impetus for profound change, as well. But make

no mistake, Buddhism requires diligent practice. People who achieve lofty aims in life do not attain them by sitting in front of a television set or playing card games all day. Likewise, people who wish to transform their lives need to make a dedicated effort to do so.

We are conditioned in this society to expect an instant fix while not bothering to contemplate that our flaws and manner of thinking took all our lives to develop and will take years of practice to change. When inmates attend Buddhist practice for the first time they are alarmed at having to be quiet without being able to pinball from one activity to another. But those who return over and over again are eventually transformed. They find what others say they want most of all: peace of mind and happiness.

This process can be long and arduous, but at the same time it is truly rewarding. You cannot become a great basketball player by lying in bed thinking about it. You have to go out on the court and practice basketball. If you want to develop muscles, you need to pump iron. To calm the mind, reduce your anger, increase your concentration, become aware, and learn to be happy, you must devote effort to the practice of meditation. Remember, though, meditation is not a competitive sport. It is better not to push for a specific result. Just sit and breathe. That is the first step.

There is no one ideal technique or a single method of meditation practice. Each of us approaches meditation from a different point of view. Put a red rose on a table and each person will see something different. For one person, the rose may represent a garden he worked in. For another it may conjure up memories of his mother. For another person a rose may be an irritating plant with thorns. We all bring a

different perspective to every situation, and no one way is best for everyone. However, there are a few suggestions to facilitate the process of learning to meditate.

Many of these methods have been used for thousands of years, and are tried and true. Try one of the ancient meditation practices that have been handed down by enlightened masters before attempting to create your own. Nonetheless, if you have found something that works to calm your mind and help you relax, then by all means go for it. It is a good idea after trying meditation on your own for a while to seek out a teacher or at a minimum read the meditation manuals available to prisoners upon request. Help is always available. Don't be afraid to ask for it—it's a real shortcut!

GETTING STARTED

Do what you can to create an environment most conducive to relaxation. Find a time of day when there is the least distraction—very early in the morning and late at night are good times. Try to practice at the same time each day, twice if possible. There is no set amount of time for meditation, but most people find it easiest to start with ten to fifteen minutes and work up from there. Generally speaking it is advisable not to sit for more than thirty to forty minutes at a time without moving.

Pick a place that has no draft and is not too cold or hot—though in truth, it's possible to do meditation anywhere. Wear loose-fitting clothes. If you do not have a meditation cushion and meditation mat, fold a blanket into a padded mat. Sit on it, buttocks slightly elevated from the floor with legs crossed in a comfortable position, perhaps with one leg

in front of or over the other leg. Make sure you have padding for your ankles and try to have your knees on the floor. You can also try a kneeling posture by straddling a cushion, pillow, or blanket. If you have back or knee problems or if you are unable to sit on the floor in this way, try sitting in a chair. Sit toward the front edge of the seat with your back away from the backrest. If no chair is available, sit on the edge of your bed or bunk. Remember, you get no points for looking cool or for pain endurance—don't twist yourself up into a pretzel for no reason!

The important thing is to get comfortable with your back straight without forcing the posture. The correct posture will come naturally with practice. Your shoulders should be even and not slouched forward. Relax your mouth, but keep it closed. Your head should be erect: your nose in line with your navel, your ears in line with your shoulders.

Keep your eyes slightly closed, looking down at a 45-degree angle. Try to avoid closing your eyes entirely or staring straight ahead. Although some people meditate with their eyes closed, it is not ideal because you can easily fall asleep. The mind also tends to wander more readily when the eyes are closed. Keeping the eyes slightly open helps to bring your meditation into your daily life.

Try to make your place of meditation as welcoming as possible. For example, you might like to place a picture of the Buddha, Jesus, or a favorite deity in front of you for inspiration or arrange photos of nature, a flower or fruit or something else, or nothing, if you prefer. Experiment so that you find a way to be comfortable and not easily distracted. If you can do all this and put a slight smile on your face, you are in one of the most ideal positions for meditation.

Once you find the posture you like most, then it is time to try one of the more effective means used to calm the mind, quiet the incessant mental chatter we all experience, and learn to relax and meditate. There are countless effective methods, and you may come up with something other than the suggestions in this book that work for you. Look for a way to calm your mind so that meditation is possible. Remember that the first stage of meditation is quiet stillness, free of activity. Advanced meditation is quietness in the *midst* of activity—but this can take years of practice to achieve.

When you have finished meditating, before you get up and move, bring your awareness back to your breath. Now bow to your altar, image, or wall, or bow simply to stretch your back. Get a feel of your body to make sure your legs have not fallen asleep while you were sitting. Get up slowly, mindfully, and observe how peaceful you feel. By taking this mental holiday you have made it possible for your mind to deal with your surroundings in a more serene, effective manner.

Try not to think too much about what you should be feeling or experiencing. Try not to let your mind play with thoughts. Don't worry about what you will be doing after you have finished practicing. The future gets here so soon that you don't have time to think about it anyway. Just relax and experiment with one of these methods.

METHODS OF MEDITATION

COUNTING THE BREATH

When you first begin meditation you will probably experience many thoughts and feelings rising to your consciousness. Counting the breath introduces you to the practice of

meditation and helps you establish a rhythm. This ancient method is by far the most straightforward, practical, and effective means to calm and focus the mind. It is commonly given as the initial practice to beginners in many schools of meditation, but it is also used by advanced practitioners.

With hands palm down on the knees or placed in your lap palms up, left hand on top of the right, with the tips of your thumbs lightly touching, breathe in deeply, and as you exhale count *one*. Try not to think of anything. Instead, focus on that single breath. As you continue focusing on the breath, extend the count to the absolute end of the breath: *o-o-o-o-n-n-n-n-e-e-e-e*. Inhale, and as you exhale count *two*, again, extending the mental count throughout the entire length of the breath. Continue like this until you get to ten, then go back to one again. If along the way your mind begins to act like a monkey swinging from branch to branch, stop, smile at the monkey mind, and begin again with *one*. Breathe in, breathe out, *o-o-o-o-n-n-n-n-e-e-e-e*. Breathe in, breathe out, *tw-o-o-o-o-o-o*. And continue on.

Most people have trouble getting past three at first. Try it. It is not a contest! Do not be hard on yourself. Just keep trying. That is why they call it practice. Eventually you will get to four or five before a distracting thought arises. Then you will get to eight or even nine without thinking of anything and then your mind will congratulate you for getting that far or you will begin thinking about your pet or something will pop up and that is when you stop, smile, and begin again. Keep trying this. Like anything else you will get better at it with practice.

As you become more experienced, your awareness will become more subtle. You will be less bound by expectations

and will be more mindful. In time, you will be able to let go of the false identity of “I” and your mind will open to the universe in all its possibilities. Until such time, sit quietly, patiently, attentively. When thoughts arise do not struggle with them, just gently set them aside. Breathe in air, breathe out calm, and don’t forget to smile at the wonder of it all. The rest will come when you least expect it.

COMPRESSED PRACTICE

A common remark made by beginners is the difficulty of sitting quietly for an extended period of time. Sitting down for twenty to forty minutes with the mind swirling and joints aching can be discouraging for anyone, all the more so if you don’t have the advice and support of a teacher. One solution is to learn how to sit in smaller bites. It’s a kind of “compressed practice.”

Try sitting for five minutes. Breathe in, focusing on the air coming into your nostrils. Breathe out all the air you can and count that as one. Keep that up to the count of ten then get up and mindfully stretch. Stand still for a moment and sit again for another session of five minutes. If thoughts arise during your breath counts, do not get frustrated. It is only the old monkey mind trying to interfere. Do this compressed practice over and over again for as long as you like for up to half an hour. Try this consistently and you will find that you are able to sit for longer periods and with less strain.

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness lets us see the world as it is rather than as we wish it to be. It is not necessary to sit on a cushion in front

of an altar to practice mindfulness. Anyone can do it anytime, anywhere. Being mindful requires us to pay attention to what we say, think, and do. The more we go through that process, the more we become aware of past actions that were harmful or at the very least selfish. Mindfulness places our deeds under a microscope for scrutinizing without the distortion of illusion. It dissolves our idealized view of ourselves and completely exposes us.

It is mindfulness that makes it possible to free ourselves from having a shameful past by enabling us to live in the present moment. When we do that, we are more aware of our actions. We pay close attention to what we do, say, and even think, and because of this we are improving what will happen to us in the future.

How do we practice mindfulness? Mindfully going to shave, I breathe in, I breathe out. Mindfully lathering my face, I breathe in, I breathe out. Mindfully I begin to shave. I breathe in, I breathe out. I nick myself, a dot of blood appears. How easily I forget to be mindful. Mindfully I wipe the blood from my cheek. I breathe in, I breathe out.

WATER-DIRT MEDITATION

This method is particularly effective for those who need a visual tool to help in the meditation process. Don't try it, though, if it means being sent to segregation or getting an infraction!

Take a small, empty, clear plastic jar and put three or four heaping spoons of dirt in it. Fill the rest of the jar with water. When you are ready to meditate, vigorously shake the jar and set it slightly in front of you. Rest your eyes on the jar and imagine that your mind is like the contents of the jar: a

mass of swirling thoughts and concepts and chatter. Remember to breathe deeply, but naturally. Keep your eyes on the jar and observe as the dirt settles. As the water becomes clearer, so will your mind. When you become angry, it is like shaking up that jar of dirt and water. Your mind becomes cloudy and confused. If you sit calmly and breathe deeply, your anger will settle calmly like dirt in water. Try this at least twice if possible. Keep in mind that if the dirt is fine it may take a while to settle. That's okay. After all, the one thing prisoners have in abundance is time.

SOUND MEDITATION

Get comfortable and sit in your preferred posture. If you have a clock, focus on the ticking of the clock. Four or five ticks for the in-breath, three or four ticks for the out-breath. Each time thoughts invade your mind, stop, smile at the thought, then start again. You get no medals, no one will criticize you, there are no judges. Just you and the clock. Other sounds can be utilized as well. When a gate slams loudly, stop whatever you are doing and use what could be an irritating noise as a reminder to practice a mindfulness exercise by breathing in and smiling. Thank the sound for slowing you down and allowing you to be present and attentive. Then, for a few seconds, breathe in deeply and breathe out. Try not to think about the task or activity you were just involved in. Allow yourself to be present. By doing this type of exercise with sounds, you transform your thinking and attitude about things you consider to be negative. Loud noises are part of prison life. If you can make them work for you, then you are well on the way to developing a strong meditation practice.

PEBBLE MEDITATION

Often people come to prison with depression, hyperactivity, or attention deficit disorder. It is so difficult for them to calm their mind that they give up trying or never start. For such people, sitting still can pose as great a challenge as dealing with the problems that meditation helps solve. If you feel that this describes you, this simple tool to calm the mind might be helpful.

Collect ten pebbles or ten other small objects. Find a comfortable place to sit. Perhaps you can use the cell when everyone is elsewhere or asleep. Place the pebbles at arm's length in front of you. Sit up, inhale and exhale three times deeply. Then slowly, mindfully, lean forward, breathe in, and pick up a pebble. Now sit upright while exhaling and place the pebble beside you. Repeat this process until all the pebbles are gathered together near you. Then pick up one of the pebbles, inhale, lean forward and place it in front of you at arms' length. Repeat this until all of the pebbles are back where they started. Sit upright. Breathe deeply three times and smile at your practice. Observe how you feel. Do this every day at more or less the same time for two to three weeks. When you think you are ready, try one of the other exercises mentioned here or any meditation method you know. You will find that your body and mind respond well to being more relaxed and calm.

WALKING MEDITATION

Most prisoners walk every day. Whether it is walking to the chow hall, going to the medical clinic, the library, getting to work, or walking the exercise yard, the opportunity to practice is there.

You cannot walk normally and match your breath with each step. That would be too slow for prison officials. Instead, try breathing in while taking three steps and breathing out while taking three steps. Or just bring your awareness to your feet and to the process of walking. Pay attention as you move your legs with each step. If you know a chant or have a favorite mantra you might use that while walking in the yard. With practice you will discover how many steps are necessary to finish a particular chant. If you do this every day, you will learn that there are a certain number of chants you can do in one circumambulation of the yard. You can do the same thing in your cell. Or you can circle your cell slowly, matching your step to each breath.

You have to breathe to stay alive, and most people have to walk to get from place to place. You might as well use these necessities to deepen your practice. Be creative. Find ways to include sound, lights, or even your cell space in your practice. Officers have to count prisoners at least three times a day in most prisons. This is usually done at the same time every day. Fifteen to thirty minutes before each time the officers call for count, begin your practice. When count is called use that as your gong to end the practice. See what works for you.

TEA MEDITATION

The simple act of making tea can be a profound meditation practice. All day long we decide to do one task or another without giving much thought to what we are doing. If you do something, do it wholeheartedly. If you wish to make tea, try mindful tea making. Take a cloth or paper towel and place it on the table or floor. On that, put all your tea

ingredients. Make the hot water being mindful of where the water came from and the miracle of water. Sit down with the hot water and tea ingredients and steep your tea attentively. Think of the tea growing in the sun and the minerals that help make tea. Think about the people who harvest the tea leaves and how it got to you. Smile at the rain that kept the ground moist and the vendors who sold you the tea. If you were able to think of everything connected with your tea it would take forever, because the tea contains everything in the universe. After a reasonable amount of time dedicated to mindful tea making, begin mindful tea drinking. Sip your tea slowly, and taste the universe.

SMILING PRACTICE

Smiling is an easy exercise and normally comes naturally to people. In prison, though, smiles are rare, which is why smiling in prison is a practice that requires some work. It is far easier to get and give frowns and dour looks than to smile. The surest way to reverse frowning trends is to mindfully smile at the frozen people who rarely if ever smile. From there, smile at the morning, at the food, at the people near you, and at every situation possible. Do this for a day and two things will happen: your face will ache from the continued effort and you will sleep peacefully.

If you don't already smile most of the time, or if you have to think about smiling before you do it, then smiling practice is a great way to begin meditation. Since there are more muscles involved in maintaining a frown than a smile, it makes sense to smile. Smiling practice is a delightful way to set the tone for the entire day and it also helps dissolve barriers and remove obstacles.

When you wake up, don't do anything until you smile. When you go to the bathroom, smile while urinating. Smile at your reflection in the mirror and smile while combing your hair and washing your face—not a big cheesy grin, but a gentle smile that adds light to your eyes. Smile at every “first” in your day. When you first walk out the door, when you first see a meal, when you first see your boss and co-workers. Smile at the razor wire, smile at the concrete. Within the radiance of your true smile everything will be embraced. Give your friend a warm smile, he or she needs it. Give the person you dislike a warm smile, he or she needs it as well. At the end of your day as you lie down in your bed, smile at your dreams and you will know that your smiling day was, beyond a doubt, delightful.

LOVING-KINDNESS MEDITATION

In prison, there are a lot of raw emotions running around, both internally and externally. When you become more mindful, you will be aware of these emotions, begin to understand where they come from, and recognize which are helpful and which are not. In so doing, you will be more in control and will not be at the mercy of your feelings. One way to achieve this awareness is the practice of loving-kindness meditation.

Sit comfortably in a quiet spot. If you have one, place a mirror in front of you so that you can see your face. Breathe in and out deeply three times. Think of the person in the mirror who once was a baby. Extend loving thoughts out to that baby saying: “May you be happy. May you be well. May you be free from distress. May you find peace.” Think of the face in the mirror as a child learning to ride a bike.

Extend loving-kindness to that child. See the face in the mirror as an adolescent showing signs of independence. Extend loving-kindness to that child. Think of the face in the mirror as a young teenager going into high school. Extend to him loving-kindness. Look at the face in the mirror and see the person reflected there as a young adult. Extend to him loving-kindness. Continue to do this until you reach your current age. Say to yourself, "May I be happy. May I be well. May I be free from distress. May I be filled with peace and love."

Look at your present face and forgive yourself for all your past transgressions. Extend to yourself loving-kindness. Breathe in and out deeply. Smile. Then think of those you love most. Extend to them your caring and offer them loving-kindness. Think of the friends you have and do the same for them. Breathe in, breathe out deeply as you do this. Think of people you do not know well. Offer them kind thoughts. Think of all those you do not like. Forgive them for their actions and offer them thoughts of loving-kindness. Finally, think of your greatest enemies or those who did you great harm. Breathe deeply, smile, and offer them the same loving-kindness you offered to those you love most. Smile into the mirror, and say, "May all beings be happy. May all beings be well. May all beings be free from distress. May all beings find peace."

FINAL THOUGHTS ON MEDITATION

Our minds are busy from the time we wake up in the morning until we fall asleep at night. We spend the entire day chasing thoughts. In meditation, we learn to pay attention to what is in our minds. Eventually, we notice that thoughts do not flow from one to the other like river water. A

thought ends and another begins and in between is a split second of quiet. Meditation can increase the duration of these moments and allow our mind to rest. There will be occasions when you have thoughts and mental formations that are distracting. Try to recognize them for what they are and gently ignore them without playing with that particular thought. Bring your attention back to the stillness of your calm mind and continue with your practice.

It takes calmness, patience, and a certain degree of faith to practice every day. The changes we may be seeking are so subtle and gradual that progress can be imperceptible. Do not berate yourself for failing to immediately see the changes taking place within. Know that your practice is testimony to the fact that you have the courage to embark upon the most demanding endeavor of your life as well as the most rewarding. Be heartened by the fact that you are willing to examine core beliefs and endure what may be painful insights in order to experience the inner transformation necessary to outwardly change our behaviors.

Practice has its own dynamics and rhythms—no two periods of meditation are identical. Calmly persevere by gently working through all that practice offers. In time, you will find that engaging in practice is the most comfortable, fascinating, natural thing to do.

Nothing could be more worthwhile than taking time out of each day to get away from the card games, the television, the war stories, and the negativity and just be with yourself, cultivating your mind, calming your mind, and learning to be happy.