

Practicing Mindful Awareness

Although the instructions following are sufficient for beginning the practice of mindful awareness, if one wishes to delve deeper, it is important to have personal instruction from a qualified teacher.

Also, please note: Persons with respiratory issues should consult a health professional before doing any breathing exercise.

Phases of Mindful Awareness Practice

The practice of mindful awareness trains you to:

- Pay better attention to what you are doing.
- Maintain that attention for longer periods of time.
- Notice more quickly when your attention wanders.
- Return more sharply to the here and now.

The *mindful* aspect of the practice is being precisely focused on what your body and mind are doing in the here and now, whether you are sitting still or performing an activity. The *awareness* aspect of the practice is being tuned in to the environment in which your thoughts and perceptions come and go, moment by moment.

Combining the precision of mindfulness and the perspective of awareness, you can return to the present when you wander, and be fully responsive to whatever arises in your experience.

Take Your Seat

Find a place where you can sit uninterrupted for as long as you intend to practice. For a beginner, it is helpful to find a quiet place, and practice for short periods of time. Until you strengthen your concentration, any hustle and bustle around you will be distracting. When your focus is stronger, you will be able to maintain your mindful awareness while in the midst of a busy workplace, during an intense conversation, or with a group of friends at a restaurant.

While this practice is traditionally done sitting cross-legged on a cushion, most people find it easier to sit on a chair or footstool. If you use a chair, sit in the center of the seat without leaning against the back. It's helpful to have your knees level with or lower than your hips, to prevent strain on your legs and back. Your feet can be flat on the floor, or loosely crossed in front of you.

Hold Your Posture

Practicing mindful awareness is best begun in sitting position because when we stand there is a tendency to move, and when we lie down there is a tendency to fall asleep. People sit up straight when they're paying attention. That's why we say, "we're on the edge of our seats" when we are very interested in something. Simply taking this position with good posture promotes mindful awareness.

Good posture makes it easier to stay attentive, and easier to breathe. You'll want your spine to be upright but not rigid. The back of your head can gently extend back and up, so that your chin tucks in slightly. To get the proper feeling of this, stand with your shoulder blades and hips against a wall, and gently bring the back of your head to the wall.

Let your sternum (breastbone) move very slightly up and forward, while the middle of your back moves very slightly backward and wider. This expansion of your torso takes pressure off your lungs, allowing you to breathe more easily and fully.

Sitting up straight but not stiff is ideal, so feel as if your spine is a tent pole and the rest of your body is like canvas hanging loosely from the top of the pole.

Let your arms hang straight down from your shoulders, and place your hands palm down on top of your thighs, just behind your knees. Let your jaw muscles soften, leaving your lips lightly closed.

Grounding

Having established proper posture, the next step in mind training is the process of getting grounded in three stages:

First, gently close your eyes. Let any excess tension, beyond what you need to hold your posture, flow out of your body by mentally scanning from head to toe. With the intention to soften areas of tension, just touching them with your awareness will start to dissolve them, like sunlight melting snowflakes in the morning. Notice any tightness in your:

- face, jaw, and neck,
- shoulders, arms, and hands,
- chest and shoulder blades,
- belly and lower back,
- hips, thighs, calves, and feet.

Let the tension you encounter dissolve as much as it will, and feel that it flows down and out of you, into the earth.

Second, let your mind move down into your core. Most of us feel that our mind is somewhere in the front of our head, because much of what we use to engage our world—our eyes, ears, nose and mouth—are positioned there. With your eyes still gently closed, let your mind fall backward, toward the back of your skull, with the same feeling as letting yourself fall into the back and arms of a big, soft easy chair. From there, let your mind drop slowly down through your body. Feel that you are settling downward along the front of your spine, like a leaf slowly drifting down to the bottom of a pool, past your throat, heart, and stomach, to your deep core just below your navel.

The third phase of grounding is merging with the earth through deep, rhythmic breathing. Imagine that as each breath goes out, you sink deeper into the seat you're sitting on. As you breathe in, just stabilize that feeling. Sink deeper and deeper each time you breathe out, eventually feeling like you are merging with the earth— that's as grounded as you can be. Your breathing will become slower and softer as you become more settled and relaxed.

Close Placement of the Mind

When you train a dog or horse, you first need to tame it. You give it a very short leash, holding it close to you so you can pull it back quickly when it starts to stray. You need to tame your mind in the same way; therefore, this phase of practice is called “close placement.” By

focusing your attention only on your posture and your breath, you keep your mind placed close to you, on a short leash.

It is traditional to use the breath as the basis for training in mindful awareness. Our breath is somewhat under our control (for only so long), but also happens when we're not thinking about it. It is part of the environment coming into us, and part of us going out into the environment.

In this phase of practice, you focus your attention on your body as you breathe in and out. Your role is that of an observer, not consciously directing your breathing.

Open your eyes halfway, so that your eyelids block the upper half of your field of vision. Feel as if you are looking downward into your body, observing your posture and breathing. Your gaze is soft, not focused tightly on a spot. Tune in to the sensation of your breathing, the feeling that your torso is filling with air as you breathe in and then emptying as you breathe out.

The practice of mindful awareness includes training yourself in returning to the present moment. At some point your mind will wander into a series of thoughts, away from attention on your posture and the sensation of your breathing. When you realize your mind is someplace else, simply say to yourself mentally "back to here and now" and return to focus on your posture and breathing, without judging or criticizing yourself for wandering.

Mindful Awareness of Sense Perceptions

Once you are settled, you can use mindful awareness to connect to the present moment by shifting your focus from one particular sense perception to another—seeing, hearing, feeling. Just notice as much as you can, with no need for mental commentary.

With eyes open, soften your gaze to expand your peripheral vision. Let visual details fill your awareness, without moving your eyes. Notice shapes, colors, and shades of light and dark. Then, with eyes still open, turn your attention to sounds—near and far, loud and soft, from all directions. Notice that when you are focusing on sounds, you hear things you didn't when you were focusing on vision. Finally, still keeping your eyes open, turn your attention to bodily sensations—the weight of your body on the chair; the texture of your clothes against your skin; your torso moving with your breath; and your heartbeat or pulse. Since sense perceptions only occur in the present, this practice helps you experience staying in the present moment longer than you might have thought possible.

Then relax into an open mind, waiting for a thought. Notice how a thought suddenly appears as if from nowhere, lingers for a moment, and then disappears. Then simply be open to the next thought. Let thoughts come and go across your mind, like birds flying across the sky. In the tradition of mindful awareness, the mental recognition of thoughts is just another sense perception.

You will discover that when one sense is in the foreground of your awareness, all the others move to the background.

Environmental Awareness

Having practiced grounding, close placement, and mindful awareness of sense perceptions, a further component of training the mind is developing environmental awareness, a more panoramic perspective. In this practice, your eyes are again fully open and your gaze is softened. As your breath moves out into the space in front of you, let your mind be open to the environment around you. Your mind can move to different objects of attention—sights, sounds, smells, thoughts, and feelings—as long as they are in the here and now.

If your mind wanders into a series of thoughts, when you realize your mind is someplace else, simply say to yourself mentally “back to here and now” and return to focus on your posture, breathing, and environment, without judging or criticizing yourself for getting distracted.

Continue the practice of opening out and resting in spaciousness with each outbreath. In that way, you begin to get a wider perspective on your thought process. You can experience thoughts and other sense perceptions clearly and distinctly as they arise.

In this practice, the difference between being awake and daydreaming is very noticeable. When your mind is in the past, in the future, or wandering somewhere else in the present, you’re not awake to your immediate environment. You’re off in a daydream, asleep to the direct experience of the here and now. The ideal state of mind is to be as awake as you can be.

Don’t get discouraged if you find your mind wandering a lot. You can’t force yourself to stay in the present. Continue the practice of returning, without judgment, to the objects of your attention in the here and now. Eventually your mind will settle down.

Expansive Awareness

The final stage of a mind training session is expanding your awareness infinitely in all directions. It is an extension of the environmental awareness practice. With a very soft gaze, looking straight ahead, rest in awareness of the environment around you. With each successive outbreath, expand the scope of your awareness in stages. Imagine that your awareness opens out to the horizon, then to the sky, and then beyond the sky into space. Finally, imagine that your awareness extends in all directions farther than the farthest star, and rest in that infinite openness for as long as you can.

In that state you are completely open, your mind is limitless, and at the same time you are as centered as you can be.

Closing the Practice

Traditionally, each session of mindful awareness practice closes with an aspiration. If you choose to, in your own words you can say that you will be as mindfully aware as possible throughout the rest of the day or evening. You can also make the aspiration that training your mind will not only make you better at dieting, but a more genuine and decent human being, able to connect in a direct and helpful way with others.

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