

## Meditation and Education:

Often we think about meditation as some kind of mystical activity. As we start to practice meditation that is one of the basic beliefs we try to overcome. Meditation is completely normal; it is the Mindful quality present in everything we do.

It is a straightforward principle, but we are constantly distracted from coming to our natural state of being. Throughout our day everything pulls us away from natural mindfulness, from being on the spot (or in the present). Our natural tendency to rush also means that we're rushing past opportunities. We're either too afraid or too embarrassed or too proud or just too crazy, to be who we really are.

So the practice of mindfulness is really the practice of being alive. When we talk about the techniques of meditation, we're talking about the techniques of life. We're not talking about something that is separate from us. When we're talking about being mindful and living in a mindful way, we're talking about the practice of spontaneity.

Meditation practiced on a consistent basis, has the potential to reveal and facilitate the development of the special gifts of each student. If everyone truly has the potential for genius in some respect, meditation and the higher level of consciousness that it produces in practitioners, is the most totally reliable pedagogical method for its realization and development. Through meditation the mind becomes clear, inducing greater alertness and comprehension. Thoughts become more positive and nourishing. One begins to make fewer and fewer mistakes in life and effortlessly begins to live more in harmony with the universal order.

"Students experience more stress, more anxiety and more depression than a decade ago," researchers from Kansas State University said in an article found in *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*.

In our schools and universities we teach our children and each other to separate mind from body, politics from spirituality, male from female, black from white, West from East, art from science, human from nonhuman. Students learn how to categorize and characterize number and name, measure and manipulate. Rarely do they learn to intuit and integrate, contemplate and create, heal and hallow. A radical change in educational methods was needed to help transform our fractured selves, communities, and ecosystems. Today, we urgently need to recover as well as invent meditative approaches that tap our complete powers of awareness, expression, and compassionate action.

In exploring the educational uses of meditation, there are wide ranges of techniques: breath meditations, visualizations, word contemplations, insight meditations, mantra meditations, and chants.

## **Breath Meditation**

Nearly every contemplative tradition makes use of the breath. Simple breath meditations can transform students' fundamental relation to themselves and the world. Students simply focus on their breath. Here are the instructions: Close your eyes and take several deep, slow breaths. Now allow yourself to breathe naturally, and begin to focus on your inbreaths and your outbreaths. Be present with your breath in the region of your body where you observe it most clearly and distinctly. It can be the in and out at the nostrils, or the rising and falling of the chest or the belly. Don't look for anything in particular. Just observe whatever sensations and feelings are actually occurring moment to moment. The breath may be slow or quick, regular or irregular, deep or shallow, steady or unsteady, warm or cool, moist or dry. And the pauses between breaths may be long or short, regular or irregular. If your mind wanders, which it naturally will, simply bring your attention back to your breath. Be gentle with yourself. It is natural for the mind to wander and to chatter, so each time you notice it wandering or chattering, simply refocus your attention on your breath.

This bare attention meditation, which can be conducted for as few as two minutes, helps to clarify and concentrate attention and relax the mindbody. It is called a "bare attention" technique because it requires the practitioner to simply observe the breath as it is - without imposing ideas, visualizing images, projecting wishes and aversions, or making judgments, assumptions, and evaluations. Nearly all students become aware of the busyness of their own minds - of the insistent mental chatter. For some this is a surprise; for others, it is a fuller realization of a familiar phenomenon. The first time the meditation is done, some students will notice that the chatter diminishes as the exercise proceeds.

Repeating and lengthening the meditation on subsequent occasions will deepen its effects, and more and more students will benefit. The continual bringing back of the attention to the breath gradually builds concentration. Students also discover powers of inner perception they didn't know they had. Many, for the first time, are able to experience subtle and complex bodily sensations, such as the movement of their nasal hairs, the blockage or free flow of air through their sinuses, the expansion and contraction of their chest muscles, the elasticity or tightness of their belly muscles, or the changing rhythms of breathing. This meditation is quite powerful when practiced for ten or more minutes.

After the meditation, is an open forum, students share what they experienced. This sharing can be done after any sessions. It gives students an opportunity to express their observations, concerns, insights, questions. Initially, many will say they had a hard time concentrating and had many distracting thoughts. They will need to be reassured that this is natural and that they only need to be patient and gentle with themselves and to continually refocus their attention.

Breath meditation is also an excellent preparation for brainstorming and freewriting - two techniques that help students deepen their reflections on a text and develop their essay ideas. The meditation expands the range and depth of mental associations by dissolving blocks and relaxing conventional connections and logical linkages. Some students also use the breath meditation before studying or going to sleep. Because of the paradoxical effects of meditation, it can stimulate the alertness and concentration needed for active study, or induce the relaxation needed for falling and remaining asleep. Some students use the technique to calm themselves during finals week. This is because meditative awareness allows increased access to the forgotten details of past experiences that are stored in the brain/body and to the unnoticed details of current experiences that are continually registered subliminally.

### **Insight Meditation**

Insight meditation, also known as vipassana meditation, is a powerful bare attention technique and one of the central practices of Theravada Buddhism. Despite its Buddhist origin, it in no way requires adherence to Buddhist beliefs. All that is required is a willingness to pay attention, observe, and inquire. Here are the instructions: Close your eyes and take several deep, slow breaths. Now allow yourself to breathe naturally, and begin to focus on your inbreaths and your outbreaths. Be present with your breath in the region of your body where you observe it most clearly and distinctly. It can be the in and out at the nostrils, or the rising and falling of the chest or the belly. Don't look for anything in particular. Just observe whatever sensations and feelings are actually occurring moment to moment. [Focus on the breath for about two minutes.] Now begin to focus your attention on whatever body sensations predominate in your consciousness. They may be sensations of pressure, pain, tightness, warmth. Don't look for sensations; just observe them as they arise spontaneously. When a sensation disappears, bring your awareness back to your breath. Use your breath as the primary object of attention. When you notice your mind wandering, bring your attention back to your breath. [Focus on body sensations for at least three minutes.] Now begin to focus your attention on whatever thoughts predominate in your awareness. Don't search for them; just observe them when they spontaneously arise. They may be words, pictures, stories, memories, anticipations, fragments of conversations. Watch them as they arise and pass away. Don't try to analyze them, merely bring an alert but gentle attention to them. When a thought passes away, return to focusing on

your breath. Use your breath as the primary object of awareness. [Focus on the thoughts for at least three minutes.] Now focus your attention on the sounds that predominate in your awareness. Bring an alert, interested attention to them as they arise and pass away. Again, use your breath as the primary object. Whenever a sound arises in your consciousness, be present with it, observe it for as long as it occurs. [Focus on sounds for at least three minutes.] Now turn your attention to the feelings that pass through your consciousness. They may be feelings of sadness, anger, joy, happiness, frustration, fear, anxiety. Don't analyze the feeling. Merely observe it. Notice where it's located in your body. Notice the bodily sensations associated with the feeling. When a feeling disappears, bring your attention back to your breath. [Focus on feelings for at least three minutes.] Now allow your attention to focus on whatever sensation, thought, sound, or feeling predominates in your consciousness. Follow that mindbody state as it arises, changes, and disappears. If you wish, you may make a mental note of it by silently saying to yourself, "thought" or "feeling" or "sound" or "sensation." The important thing is just to be present with whatever passes through your consciousness. Don't try to change or interfere with it. Just observe it as it passes through your consciousness. Again, use your breath as the primary object.

It is the final phase of this meditation - the focusing on whatever mindbody state spontaneously predominates in consciousness - that is insight meditation per se. For the sake of truncating the instructional process, one can combine several meditations into one. Ordinarily, separate meditations can be carried out for body sensations, thoughts, sounds, and feelings. There can also be meditations on smells, intentions, and other mindbody states. These selective meditations are valuable in their own right, but are usually understood as preparations for insight meditation per se, which does not single out a single type of mindbody phenomenon. This truncated approach can give students a sense of what insight meditation is, but the most effective way to teach insight meditation is to do the selective meditations first and then gradually introduce the students to the nonselective practice.

## **Visualizations**

Visualization techniques also have powerful applications in the classroom. Poetic imagery for example, students can concentrate on the images that arise spontaneously in their minds as the poem is being read by others. This technique helps to fortify the students' powers of mental imaging. Here are the meditation instructions: Close your eyes. Listen carefully to the poem as someone read it. Observe the images that arise in your mind. Some of these images will be from the poem; others will be from your own life experience. Just allow the images to arise spontaneously, of their own accord. After the meditation, the discussion focuses on: the meanings of individual images; the sequencing and interrelations between images; the feelings and sensations that the poet intends to evoke with the images; the actual feelings and sensations

evoked in the students; and the interrelations among the students' experiences, the experiences of the poem's speaker, and the poet's implicit attitude.

Sometimes a more active visualization after a discussion of a poem in order to help students relate the poem more intimately to their own lives. For example, after discussing poem students can be ask to visualize a powerful experience they had in nature: Close your eyes and take a few deep, slow breaths. Recall an occasion when you had a powerful experience while alone in nature. Try to remember a time when you felt extremely connected or alive or peaceful or filled with wonder and awe. Where were you? Try to see in your mind's eye exactly where you were. Was it in the forest, at the seashore, in the desert? If you were in the forest, try to see and smell the trees, to hear and feel the wind, to see and feel the sun. Use all of your senses to reexperience the event. Were you walking or sitting? Were you silent or singing or talking to yourself? How did this powerful experience come about? What event seemed to trigger your experience? What sequence of thoughts, feelings, and sensations did you experience? How does this experience continue to affect you to this day?

After students meditate for three to five minutes, they can share his or her contemplative experience. The ensuing discussion of personal experiences is illuminating in its own right and also serves to shed new light not only on the previous poetry discussion but also on our complex relationship to the world. This particular meditation, for example, allows students to consider the difference between their original experience in nature and their reexperiencing of that encounter in the present.

### Contemplating Questions

One method for strengthening students' contemplative and creative powers is to have them meditate on a question. In a psychology course on interpersonal relations or a literature course on romantic poetry, students can be asked to contemplate questions like "What is love?" or "Who am I?" Here are the instructions: Close your eyes and take a few slow, deep breaths. Now focus your attention on the question "Who am I?" Don't force any answers. Just allow your thoughts to form spontaneously. Observe the ideas and images and feelings that arise of their own accord. Students can also pair up and repeat the question out loud to each other. Through this exercise, students become aware of their covert role identifications and self-images. They come to realize the multifarious ways in which early cultural conditioning and ongoing social pressures shape their experience of themselves. They also come to realize how their own self-judgments diminish their personal well-being and constrict their powers of love and creativity.

Meditation is an empirical art and science. Students need to experience for themselves what contemplative awareness is. Meditation also gives students more time to reflect with their full powers of awareness. Through meditative

awareness, we become more deeply responsive to ourselves and our fellow living beings. Through contemplation we reach the source of our greatest compassion, creativity, tranquillity, and joy.

Numerous studies indicate that meditation produces a significantly larger reduction in tobacco, alcohol, and none-prescribed drug use than standard substance abuse treatment and prevention programs.

Research findings include:

- Increased happiness
- Reduced stress
- Increased intelligence
- Increased creativity
- Improved memory
- Improved health
- Reduced high blood pressure
- Increased energy
- Reduced insomnia
- Decreases muscle tension
- Normalization of blood pressure
- Decreases anxiety and depression
- Decreases post-traumatic stress syndrome
- Increases self-actualization.
- Decreases hostility
- Increases family harmony

Additional Educational Findings:

Improved Academic Grades in Undergraduate and Graduate Students

British Journal of Educational Psychology 55 (1985): 164-166.

Memory and Cognition 10 (1982): 207-215.

Increased Intelligence in Secondary and College Students

Greater Interest in Academic Activities

Decreased Depression

Journal of Counseling and Development 64 (1986): 212-215

Journal of Humanistic Psychology 16(3)(1976): 51-60

Increased Tolerance

The Journal of Psychology 99 (1978): 121-127

More Positive Self-image

British Journal of Psychology 73 (1982): 57-68

Meditation is now accepted as having a highly therapeutic effect upon the mind and is used by many professional mental health workers to help induce relaxation, overcome phobias and bring about self-awareness. The benefits of

meditation are many. The most common physiological effects of meditation are reduced blood pressure, lower pulse rate, decreased metabolic rate and changes in the concentration of serum levels. A mind that is constantly confused worried and fearful has a negative affect on the body causing tension, stress, anxiety and eventually illness. Meditation is not only an excellent way to eradicate stress, tension, anxiety, panic and depression, but it is also the most natural way to help the body to heal itself. Meditation is the best source of nutrition for the mind.

Tony U-Thasoonthorn  
Founder/President  
The International Foundation for Inner Peace  
[Info@Intlfip.Org](mailto:Info@Intlfip.Org)  
[www.intlfip.org](http://www.intlfip.org)

Also:

Founder/Director  
The International Meditation Club  
[Info.Thai@Intlmedclub.Org](mailto:Info.Thai@Intlmedclub.Org)  
[www.intlmedclub.org](http://www.intlmedclub.org)