

Mindfulness Meditation and Law Libraries

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MINDFULNESS MEDITATION IN FIVE STEPS

1. Set an intention, e.g. I will do mindfulness meditation for 15 minutes. Find a relatively quiet place. Set a timer for how long you plan to meditate. Sit in a chair or cross-legged on a cushion on the floor. Keep your back straight and let your shoulders drop. Close your eyes. Take a couple of deep breaths.
2. Notice your breathing; focus on the sensation of air moving in and out of your lungs. Don't change the rhythm of your breathing, just pay attention to it. Notice all four parts of your breathing: breathing in, the top of the breath (when your lungs are full), your breathing out, and the bottom of the breath (when your lungs are empty before you take the next breath).
3. Let your breath hold you in the present moment like an anchor. As thoughts, feelings, memories or anything else comes into your mind that take your attention away from your breathing, just acknowledge whatever it is and then gently return to focusing on your breathing without any judgment of yourself or whatever the other thought was.
4. Don't try to push away or suppress thoughts or feelings. And don't judge yourself when your mind wanders away from your breath. Your job is simply to notice when your mind has wandered and to bring your attention back to your breathing.
5. Start by meditating at least 10 minutes each day for a week. The more you meditate regularly, the easier it will be to keep your attention where you want it at any time.

Reflections on Developing a Meditation Practice

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The following reflections were originally addressed to law students enrolled in my Contemplative Lawyering course in which a primary course requirement is developing a meditation practice. My intention is to help and encourage students to settle into a sustainable practice. I have slightly revised this document for a broader audience. The reflections are based upon both my own experience and my students' experience as revealed in their comments in class and in their journals.

1. **Be clear about the goal of mindfulness meditation:** The objective is subtle and unlike most of our activities. We are training our minds. **The practice is to pay attention to whatever is actually happening in the present moment—nothing more and nothing less.** The objective is only to take this time to focus your mind on your breathing while you are also open to thoughts/feelings/etc. and, when you realize your mind has moved to something else, gently and without judgment returning your awareness to your breath.
 - a. We are not trying to “stop or suppress” our thoughts or feelings. Rather, we allow them and acknowledge them. We just don’t follow them, give them energy, or hold on to them. In this sense, there are no “distractions” during meditation--only what is actually happening in our inner life. In mindfulness meditation we allow ourselves to experience whatever is actually going on for us in the present moment (“I’m upset”) without expecting ourselves to do anything about it right then (or at all). By paying attention to what goes on in our minds, we’re not committing ourselves to acting on it, we are just monitoring or witnessing what is going on. Later, after the meditation, we can decide if we want to do something about whatever came up in the meditation.
 - b. We are not trying to achieve any particular state of mind or feeling (e.g. peace, relaxation, etc.) (In contrast, Zen meditation does seek to attain a state of “no thinking.”) If you do experience those feelings, that’s great. You can be grateful for a moment and then return your attention to your breathing. However, if your meditation time seems like one “distraction” after another, that’s fine too. *Really*. Again, the practice is to pay attention to whatever is actually happening in the present moment—nothing more and nothing less. The holding on to or resisting our inner experience takes energy. Once we let go of these other goals/desires, the practice--while still demanding--feels much easier. We can relax into the meditation when we accept that we are not trying to “achieve” anything other than being present in the moment.
 - c. The primary “benefits” of the practice come not as deliberately sought after experiences or feelings (like peace), but as by-products of doing the practice regularly. When you have been practicing for a while, you will develop the capacity to be OK with whatever is actually happening in the present moment, whether it be joy, sadness, peace, anger, boredom, a fun memory, fear, satisfaction, loneliness, or panic. You will accept yourself more. When you experience that you don’t actually melt or explode (or whatever you might fear will happen) when you are just present in the moment, you will no longer need to avoid the present moment. This experience will give you confidence that you can be OK with whatever is actually happening in the present moment (“I can handle it.”). It may be uncomfortable--scary even--but we can just let it be and let it go during the meditation. And this confidence that you can

be OK with whatever is inside you provides you with great freedom to feel/see/be present to whatever is actually happening inside you and outside you in your daily life (when you are not meditating), and then to respond (rather than react) and to initiate actions in alignment with your own deepest values. This is authentic freedom and choice. Finally, this self-acceptance enables you to be more accepting of others, which opens up lots of other good dynamics in relationships.

2. **Be patient with yourself.** This is really hard. It is not going to happen in a week. It's like any other practice, you have to do it regularly; thinking about doing it doesn't count. You may engage other friends or a small community of people to help you sustain your commitment to develop a meditation practice. Meditating at the same time, in the same place for the same amount of time each day helps build this new habit. Also, meditating in a group can be very supportive.
3. **Be curious, not judgmental, about your inner life.** We've been judging ourselves and others since we were very little. It's difficult not to react to whatever we think, feel, etc. Nurturing a non-reactive and non-judgmental space in our lives is a radical act. Imagine you are an anthropologist encountering a new culture. "I'm feeling sad now...hmmm...I'm a little hungry...hmmm...I'm frustrated that I'm not better at this...hmmm"
4. **Be generous with the practice.** We're all very busy, but 10 – 15 minutes per day is always doable if we really want to do it. You can do this; you are the master of your own schedule. You can make it a priority. And, trust me that your life is unlikely to ever get less "busy," so the busyness of your life now is probably the norm going forward. So this is precisely the right time to establish a sustainable meditation practice. Getting up 15 minutes early or carving out 15 minutes from some other activity (e.g. time spent on Facebook) is possible for everyone. Consider the meditation not as another duty or obligation demanding more of your precious time, but as a little gift that you can give yourself every day, that you deserve and that is actually really good for you.
5. **Be practical.** Mindfulness meditation does not require a sterile or perfect (e.g. noise-free) environment, but if possible it's good to choose one without a lot of loud or jarring sounds. Some people find that doing another activity (e.g. exercise, yoga, having a snack or journaling about the day) before they meditate helps them. Great. That's an important insight. Use a nice-sounding timer to help you keep track of the time rather than taking occasional peeks at a clock. There are downloadable tones that are nice for this. If you find you are completely distracted and frustrated, use a technique to help you settle into the meditation (e.g. a mantra like "breathing in, breathing out"; placing one hand on your belly and one on your heart; counting the breaths to 10 and starting again at 1 if you get to 10 or if you lose track). Or, find a different focus for you mind—a candle, the sounds around you (as just noise coming into your ears), etc.
6. **If you find yourself resistant to meditating daily,** acknowledge the resistance and be curious (but not judgmental) about it. What is underlying my reluctance? For example, if it's a fear, what am I afraid of? What would happen if I just do it today?
7. **It's also OK to enjoy it.**