

## The Practice of Mindfulness

*Summary: People commonly equate Buddhism with meditation, but historically very few Buddhists meditated. Those who did, however, drew from a long and rich tradition of Buddhist philosophical and contemplative practice.*

What the Buddha “saw” in his enlightenment experience came from the alert, wakeful consciousness of his meditation. From the perspective of some types of Buddhism, for those interested in a more monastic experience, to “practice” Buddhism is to practice meditation.

The most common meditation practice is sitting meditation, in which one establishes a sitting posture, often in a cross-legged lotus or half-lotus position, with spine erect. While it may take some time for this posture to feel comfortable, it is one which eventually will enable the practitioner to maintain both stillness and stability for a half hour, hour, or in some cases much longer.

In the Theravada tradition, the first stage of most meditation practice is calming or stilling the mind by resting the attention on some particular focal point—the breath, a word or *mantra*, an image of the Buddha. Simply stilling the darting and wandering attention of the mind is no easy task. “The mind has no shame,” says teacher Joseph Goldstein. “It will follow almost any train of association.” The practice of “calming the mind,” called *samatha*, is the practice of tranquillity. Associated with *samatha* is insight meditation or *vipassana*, which directs one’s attention toward the workings of the mind and body, developing “mindfulness” of the contents of consciousness and the changing sensations of the body.

The purpose of such practice is not to turn away from the world, but to sharpen the capacity for attentive awareness in all one’s activities. Walking meditation is another form of this practice in which mindfulness is directed carefully and explicitly toward the movements of walking. As with breath-centered meditation, it involves developing conscious awareness of what, for most people, is done on auto-pilot.

In Barre, Massachusetts at the Insight Meditation Society, a group of 40 people gather for a three-day retreat to practice *vipassana* or insight meditation. One of the instructors introduces this practice to those beginning the retreat: “The core of insight meditation is the practice of mindfulness, a quality of awareness which sees without judgment. Mindfulness is developed and strengthened through sitting and walking

meditation. Meditation practice may begin by simply paying careful attention to the breath, in and out, and returning over and over to the breath when the mind wanders. The deepening stability and calmness of mind developed through this practice slowly renders the mind fit to see more clearly into itself. Such clear seeing gradually sets us free, dissolving barriers to the full development of wisdom and compassion.”