

A scenic view of a paved walkway along a lake. The walkway is bordered by a stone railing with metal posts. The path leads towards a large body of water under a clear sky. Trees with autumn foliage frame the scene. The text "PATHWAYS OF MEDITATION" and "MATT HARVEY" is overlaid in white on a dark semi-transparent background at the top.

PATHWAYS OF MEDITATION
MATT HARVEY

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WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This book serves as an introductory guide to the wide range of possibilities available to anyone interested in meditation. It is not religious in nature, and does not require that you believe, or cease to believe, anything in particular. Although many of the techniques I'll describe can be found in religious traditions such as Buddhism, the techniques themselves are really about exploring the nature of our minds and hearts from a first-person perspective, developing skills and making discoveries along the way which will enrich our lives in countless ways.

Meditation does require a certain investment of time and commitment, and is likely to require some degree of stability in your life. If you have severe mental health problems, especially reality-distorting conditions such as schizophrenia, please consult a medical professional before proceeding. And for the many people around the world who lack food, clothing, shelter and access to basic medical care, meditation may well be a luxury out of reach. Once these needs are met, however, meditation is available to anyone with a human heart and mind - irrespective of race, ethnicity, belief, gender identity or any other defining characteristic. Whoever you are, these techniques are open to you, and offered freely.

Meditation is, in many ways, one of the most personal activities we can undertake. Meditation's treasures are something that nobody can give you and nobody can withhold from you - you can, and must, find them within yourself. With that in mind, this book deliberately takes a pluralistic approach. Rather than presenting one simple method as 'the best way' to start meditating, we will instead explore a range of different approaches. As you read through the book, you'll develop a sense for what catches your interest and what doesn't seem so compelling to you right now. Trust this intuition!

If you've never meditated before, this book will teach you how to start. If you've done some practice in the past but would like to learn more, this book will flesh out your knowledge and understanding and give you a range of compelling approaches to explore.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

You've probably heard of meditation already, and maybe even have some idea what it involves. For some people it means sitting cross-legged on the floor trying to empty your mind of thoughts. Others might have been taught to pay attention to their breathing, given it a try and gotten frustrated with their mind's constant wandering. A taxi driver who was taking me to the first meditation retreat I ever attended described it rather contemptuously as 'sitting in a circle contemplating your navels'. (He was wrong - we sat in rows, not a circle.) Perhaps you've experienced guided meditation through apps like HeadSpace and Calm - to help you to sleep, or to relax at the end of a hard day at work.

At the simplest level, meditation is a formal practice where we engage with a technique (such as paying attention to the breathing, or noticing physical sensations in the body) for some period of time. There are many different meditation techniques - six of which we'll explore in the following pages - and also many reasons to practise them, leading to a variety of benefits which have been studied and demonstrated scientifically over the last few decades.

For example, meditation can take us to any of the following places:

- letting go of knee-jerk reactivity to stress and learning to rest in the present moment, free to respond appropriately with wisdom;
- getting in touch with your emotions, healing past traumas and developing emotional intelligence;
- opening the heart and finding deep inner resources of love and compassion for yourself and the people around you;
- exploring your sense of who you really are, and finding freedom from the narrow, confining ways that you may be defining yourself;
- finding a sense of grounded resilience that helps you to weather life's storms;
- discovering a source of deep inner well-being and contentment that nobody can take away from you, a refuge available at any time.

If any of the above sounds appealing, you're in the right place...

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The structure of the book is based on a six-week course that I teach to beginners. Each week, we explore a different topic; we'll start by looking at one particular approach to practice and how it can help us, then learn a meditation technique which puts the theory into practice, and finally explore an exercise which integrates the benefits of the meditation into our daily lives.

With this in mind, one way to use this book is simply to work through it one chapter at a time, spending a week (or more!) on each meditation practice before moving on. It takes time to develop these skills, and it's very helpful if you can see the effects of the practice in your own life by the time you get to the end of the book - you'll be much more motivated to keep going if you can see that it's doing something worthwhile. Six weeks is the recommended minimum, but feel free to move more slowly if that works better for you.

Another option, particularly if you've done some meditation before, is to pick and choose the bits that look interesting. Feel free to do the chapters out of order, or skip the ones that don't appeal to you - although if you do skip any, I suggest spending longer on the others so that you're still practising for six or more weeks overall. It's vital to give the practice time to do its work on you - don't short-change yourself!

Each chapter also includes a supplemental exercise. I'd suggest doing these every day when you're working on the corresponding chapter if time permits.

The final chapter of the book assumes that you've worked through the rest of the material, and offers suggestions for how to structure and support your on-going practice.

It's worth saying that the practices in this book have been chosen because they're suitable for beginners, but that doesn't mean they're limited or incomplete in any way. I've selected straightforward, accessible techniques that can be explained easily in a few pages, rather than complex, elaborate practices which require the assistance of a teacher before you can even get started. But all of these techniques are profoundly powerful if practised diligently, and will transform your life if you'll let them.

HOW LONG SHOULD YOU MEDITATE, AND WHEN?

Beginners often want to know the 'best' way to meditate - when to do it, how long for, and so on.

The best way to practise is the way that works best for you. Do what you can, when you can, with the understanding that you get out what you put in. Meditation is like playing a musical instrument - it's best to do some every day, rather than practising in fits and starts. Maybe it suits you better to do a longer session every couple of days. However you do it, it's important to keep going, and to try not to miss a session if you can possibly help it. Missing one makes it much easier to miss the next, and before you know it a week has gone by. It's much better not to start down this road! Of course, sometimes life gets in the way and it isn't possible - that's fine, just do your best, and get back into it as soon as you can.

How long? Well, the guided meditations that I've recorded for this course are ten minutes long. If you have longer, that's great - in general, more time is better, although there's a point of diminishing returns (around half an hour for beginners) when you'll get too tired to get much out of it. Again, experiment to see what works best. The key point here, however, is that *actually doing* ten minutes of meditation is infinitely better than *planning* to do half an hour but not quite getting around to it.

The best time of day to meditate is also highly individual. Some people find it easiest in the mornings, perhaps first thing after getting up, before having breakfast. Others like to meditate at the end of the day just before going to bed. Maybe the middle of the day works better for you. I've known people to spend ten minutes meditating in their cars before going into work.

Whatever time you choose, it's best to have a regular time of day to meditate, however. That way it becomes part of the daily routine, like brushing your teeth. Otherwise it's too easy to keep putting it off until it's late and you're too tired to focus.

CREATING A SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

It's helpful to have a dedicated place to meditate, preferably somewhere reasonably quiet where you won't be disturbed. If you live with other people, it's important that they know not to interrupt you. (If you have small children, you might need to choose a time of day when they'll be asleep.)

You might also find that it helps to have a space set up for meditation. For example, if you like to sit on a cushion, and you're able to leave that cushion out in your meditation spot, it makes the whole process much easier - you can simply sit down and get started, rather than having to hunt around trying to remember where you put your cushion yesterday.

I recommend using a timer for your meditation sessions. Decide at the beginning how long you want to practise for, set the timer for that period, and then place it somewhere you can't see it. It's very tempting to watch the clock during meditation, but this is not helpful! If you're following a guided meditation then you might not need a timer for that session, but it's good to have one available so that you can practise without guided audio sometimes too. If you don't have a timer, you'll find many free apps and online countdown timers which get the job done just fine - I use Insight Timer myself, available for iOS and Android at the time of writing. (I'm not on commission, I promise.)

MEDITATION POSTURES

Meditation is typically practised in one of four postures: sitting, lying down, standing, and walking. I suggest you start out with a static posture, either sitting or lying down. (Walking meditation is covered in chapter 5 as a supplementary exercise.)

Sitting tends to work best for beginners. Lying down is often very attractive because it can be more comfortable than sitting still for extended periods of time. However, it's very easy to fall asleep when lying down to meditate - your body is used to the idea that lying still means that it's time to sleep, particularly if your eyes are closed as well. By all means try it out, but if you do find yourself consistently falling asleep then switch to sitting. (Also see the section below about sleeping in meditation, since this comes up a lot.)

For sitting postures, you can either use a chair or sit on the floor with a cushion or meditation bench. (Meditation cushions come in a wide variety of shapes, colours and materials - personally I like the buckwheat ones.)

We're used to seeing images of meditators sitting on the floor in the full lotus position, and many people assume that this is the best way to do it, but for many Westerners the full lotus is difficult to achieve, excruciatingly painful and even damaging if you force yourself into a posture that your body doesn't want to make. The major meditation traditions have come to us from countries where people habitually sit on the floor, and the various seated meditation postures we're familiar with are quite natural to people who've grown up in those cultures. In contrast, in the West we typically sit on chairs, and this is often a better choice for beginning meditators used to sitting that way.

That said, it's common to slump or slouch when sitting in chairs, and that isn't particularly helpful either. The ideal meditation posture is one which is stable, upright and relaxed. Here are some points of posture which will keep your body in physical state which is supportive for meditation.

- Your sitting posture should be stable and grounded. If you're sitting in a chair, your feet should be flat on the floor. If you're sitting on the floor, ideally your knees should be in contact with the ground. Don't force this to happen, though! You can place small cushions under the knees if that provides you with more support.
- The hips should be higher than the knees. If the knees are too high, this tends to introduce tension into the abdomen. If you're sitting on the floor, you'll almost certainly need to put some kind of cushion or support under your sitting bones to raise the hips up. Even if you're sitting in a chair, check the angle of your thighs and see whether you need to place an extra cushion on the seat to raise your hips a little.
- The spine should be upright - pointing up to the ceiling, not leaning to one side or the other, not hunched forward or leaning back. Keep the body relaxed, allowing the spine to retain its natural curvature rather than forcing the back to be perfectly straight. If you're sitting on a chair, perch on it so that your back is unsupported, rather than leaning against the back of the chair. If it's too painful to sit that way, experiment with adding back support, but don't allow yourself to slump if you can help it. It'll feel uncomfortable to sit unsupported at first, but your posture muscles will get stronger with time and you'll get used to it. That said, if you have back problems, please be sensible about this and don't hurt yourself!
- The hands can rest in the lap or on the thighs. Some people find it helpful to have a small cushion or blanket in the lap to rest the hands on.
- The head should 'float' on top of the spine, rather than sticking out or nodding forward. To counteract the tendency to stick your head forward, slightly tuck your chin, as if holding an orange between the chin and the chest.
- The eyes can be open, half-open or closed, whichever you prefer. Some techniques are easier with the eyes closed, some easier with the eyes open, but experiment and see what works for you. If the eyes are open, angle your gaze downward and keep it soft, so that the eyes are letting light in but you aren't looking *at* anything in particular.
- As much as possible, and without losing the integrity of any of the points of posture above, relax the rest of the body.

For lying postures, it's most common to lie flat on the back, legs straight out. If you have tight hamstrings or back problems, you might find it safer and more comfortable to bend the legs and have the soles of the feet flat on the floor. If lying on your back doesn't work, you can also experiment with lying on your side.

Some physical discomfort is almost inevitable in meditation practice, especially when starting out. After a couple of weeks your body will get used to it and it'll get easier. But do be sensible about this and take care of yourself, especially your knees. You shouldn't be in a lot of pain. Please don't hurt yourself.

I CAN'T MEDITATE, MY MIND KEEPS WANDERING!

Perhaps the primary cause of frustration for beginning meditators is the mind's tendency to wander. You sit down and try to pay attention to the breathing, and before you're even three breaths in you're already thinking about something else. So you come back to the breath, try again, and moments later you're distracted again. This gets frustrating very quickly, and you might even come to the conclusion that you're just not cut out for meditation.

Nothing could be further from the truth!

It's vitally important to understand that it's the nature of the mind to wander. Our minds are constantly scanning the environment, looking for threats, like tigers crouching in the long grass waiting to jump out and eat us. If our ancestors' minds *hadn't* been constantly on the lookout, we probably wouldn't be here now. Lurking tigers aren't quite such a threat these days, but that same awareness keeps us safe when crossing busy roads. So, far from being angry with our minds for wandering, we should really be grateful to them for working so hard to keep us alive.

One of the key skills that we *do* want to develop through meditation is mental stability - the ability to pay attention to something without the mind wandering. But notice that I'm saying 'develop' - the mind has to be *trained* to stay still, precisely because it doesn't come naturally.

The good news is that training the mind to focus is an integral part of meditation practice, and you don't have to do anything special - it happens very naturally, each time you get distracted! Whenever you catch yourself planning your next holiday and gently bring yourself back to the meditation practice, you're training the 'muscle' of mental stability. One well-known meditation teacher likes to say 'even when it isn't working, it's working' - in other words, even when your meditation seems totally chaotic and scattered, you're still improving your ability to focus each time you notice that you've become distracted and come back to the technique again.

So please don't give up! Persevere, and give it time to work. Just remember that you aren't doing anything *wrong* when you get distracted - it's simply how the mind works.

I FALL ASLEEP WHEN I MEDITATE!

New meditators often find themselves falling asleep at first. We lead busy lives, always rushing from one place to another, and we only stop moving when it's time to go to sleep, so the body takes your lack of movement as a sign that the day is over.

With practice, this tends to sort itself out in a couple of weeks. The body and mind get used to the idea that it's possible to be still for ten minutes or half an hour without this being a signal to fall asleep.

However, if you continue to struggle, here are a few things you can try.

First, look at your posture. If you lie down to meditate, try sitting up. (If sitting without back support is painful, try using a chair or setting yourself up against a wall.) If you fall asleep when sitting, you could try standing up. It's pretty hard to fall asleep standing up!

Second, if you have the eyes closed, try opening them. Letting a bit of light in can help to keep you awake, and practising in a brightly lit room can reinforce this.

Third, you might need to experiment with practising at a different time of day. If you've been sitting first thing in the morning, try doing it after you've had your morning coffee, or practising in the evening instead. Conversely, if sitting late in the day isn't working, try first thing in the morning.

If all of this fails, you might actually just need to sleep a bit more! Many of us are chronically sleep-deprived due to the countless demands of modern life, and this might be your body's way of crying out for help. A big part of meditation practice is about learning to be kind to ourselves, and that starts with making sure that we get enough rest. So listen to your body and see what it needs.

1: MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness has enjoyed an explosion of popularity in recent years, with a large and growing body of scientific evidence demonstrating its benefits, and even a wide-ranging cast of celebrity endorsements. But what is it, how do we practise it, and why would we want to?

Jon Kabat-Zinn, who developed the first modern mindfulness training programme while working with chronic pain patients at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in the late 1970s, defines mindfulness as: ‘the awareness that arises when paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally’. Let’s break this down and look at each part in turn.

Being able to pay attention, to stay focused on a task without getting distracted, is a pretty fundamental life skill. It’s hard to get anything done if we’re forever getting distracted! Through meditation and other mindfulness practices we learn to strengthen our ability to pay attention, so that we’re less prone to mind wandering and forgetfulness. As this power develops, we find that we’re able to remain calmer and more open in the face of whatever life throws at us.

The next part of the definition, ‘on purpose’, might seem strange or redundant at first. Isn’t ‘paying attention’ something that we do on purpose by definition? Well, consider that in modern life we have many different things competing for our attention. Our phones send a constant stream of notifications; advertising screams at us from every television, cinema screen, web page and billboard. A catchy jingle sticks in the mind, and we find ourselves humming the tune hours later. For the most part, we aren’t *choosing* to pay attention to these things, but they *steal* our attention anyway. So a core part of developing mindfulness is learning to exert some control over this process - to be able to pay attention *on purpose*, rather than being at the mercy of whatever tries to take it away from us.

The third part of the definition is ‘in the present moment’. Bringing our attention into the present moment is central to the power of mindfulness. We spend much of our lives paying attention to anything *but* the present moment - worrying about the future, dredging up the past again and again, imagining an alternative version of the present which is more appealing than reality. Being mindful doesn’t mean that we live *only* in the moment, never making plan, learning from our mistakes or even reminiscing, but it encourages us to be present in the midst of our lives as much as possible, rather than living primarily in the future or the past. Very often, what’s right in front of us isn’t as bad as the unpleasant

possible future we're imagining - when you're fully in the present, a lot of the mental energy that goes into dreaming up and worrying about hypothetical problems is freed up to appreciate what's here in this moment. Over time, we can find a powerful sense of freedom, openness and richness right here and now, even in tough times.

The final piece of the puzzle is developing a sense of non-judgmental acceptance of what's going on right now. We don't become fatalistic or passive, but rather we learn to let go of our reactivity, so that we can choose our actions wisely rather than being pushed around by forces outside our control. We tend to see the world through the lens of our preferences - this is good (and I want more of it), that's bad (and I want it to go away) - and so we experience a constant sense of dissatisfaction with the way things actually *are*, always falling short of how they *could be*. Mindfulness encourages us to allow our experience to be just as it is without wishing it were different somehow. This helps us to suspend our 'inner critic' and deal with whatever's in front of us more effectively.

Mindfulness is a powerful skill which will enrich your life on every level. It helps us deal with the tough times, and encourages us to be fully present to enjoy the good times too. So now we'll take a look at a couple of practices which will help us to develop this vital skill: a meditation technique for developing mindfulness using the breath, and an exercise which weaves mindfulness into the course of our daily activities so that we can experience the benefits in the midst of our lives too. Let's get started!

TECHNIQUE: MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING

In this practice, we will cultivate mindfulness through paying attention to the breath.

For a guided version of this meditation practice, see the Audio page on my website, <https://www.cheltenhamzen.co.uk/audio.html#shorter>. This practice is called '10-minute mindful breath counting' on the website.

If you don't have access to the Internet or would prefer not to use guided audio, I'll describe the practice below. It's best to read through all the instructions before getting started, rather than continually referring back to them as you're practising.

To begin, set yourself up in a comfortable meditation posture. Now bring your attention to the physical sensations of your breathing. Notice where you feel the breath. This might be in several places; perhaps air moving at the nostrils or on the top lip, perhaps your chest rising and falling, perhaps movement in the abdomen. Take a moment to explore this.

When you're in touch with the physical sensations of the breath, pick one particular spot to pay attention to. I recommend you choose the lowest point in the body where you can feel movement (which might be the abdomen, the chest, or somewhere else - each person is different, there's no 'right answer'); paying attention to the breath low down in the body helps to keep you grounded, whereas paying attention to the breath at the nose can make the practice too 'heady' and encourage the mind to wander. But try it out and see what works for you - if you find it very difficult to stay with the breathing low down in the body, then pay attention wherever you notice the breath most strongly.

Once you've established your attention on the physical sensations of the breathing, begin to count the breaths. On an in-breath, count 1. On the next out-breath, count 2. On the in-breath, count 3, and so on, up to 10. When you get to 10, on the next in-breath start again at 1, and keep going.

Any time you notice that your mind has wandered - you find yourself thinking about something, or realise you've lost count - simply notice and acknowledge that the mind has wandered, gently let go of the distraction, and then bring your attention back to the breath, starting the count again at 1 on the next in-breath.

Remember, in mindfulness practice we take a non-judgemental attitude. Distractions aren't 'good' or 'bad', they're just what's happening right now. It isn't 'better' to stay with the breath and 'worse' to have a wandering mind. This practice consists of paying attention to the breath and the count, noticing whatever happens, without needing it to be any particular way. We aren't trying to have a certain 'correct' meditation experience, and we certainly aren't trying to push away the distractions or forcibly silence the mind; we're simply seeing what happens as we attempt to count our breaths.

All sorts of things can come up in this practice: thoughts, memories, emotions, physical sensations, sights, sounds, and so on. It's all fine, and we deal with it all in the same way - simply noticing what's coming up, gently letting it go, and returning to the breath and the count. Some of what comes up may feel very important, even urgent, but unless it's a true emergency we can let even these experiences go as well, and trust that anything of true value will still be with us at the end of the practice.

When you're ready to end the practice, bring some gentle movement back into the body - perhaps moving fingers and toes, twisting or stretching, whatever kind of movement feels good to you. In your own time, come out of your meditation posture, and then you're ready to go on with your day.

EXERCISE: MINDFULNESS IN DAILY LIFE

Meditation is an ideal training ground to develop the skill of mindfulness. When we meditate, we set up a quiet environment relatively free from distractions, and we consciously employ a technique which is designed to provide cues to remind us when our minds have wandered away yet again. By comparison, daily life is chaotic - many things to do, often at the same time, simultaneous demands on our attention, constant streams of notifications, and so on.

So how do we begin to bring mindfulness into daily life? The most effective approach is to start small and gradually work up from there. So, for example, you might decide to brush your teeth mindfully. Feel the weight of the toothbrush in your hand. Notice the taste and scent of the toothpaste. Feel the brush on your teeth and gums. Keep coming back to the physical sensations of brushing your teeth, in the present moment, non-judgementally. (Focusing on the physical sensations will help to keep the mind in the present moment and away from distracting thoughts.) Notice if the mind has wandered away, and if so, gently let go of the distraction and come back to brushing your teeth.

Or maybe you'd like to take a shower mindfully, or wash the dishes mindfully, or walk mindfully, or whatever else it might be. Any activity can be performed in a mindful way - by paying attention to it, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally, ideally with a particular focus on the physical sensations involved. Shorter activities are easier at first, but you can also break down a longer activity into smaller sections and practise bringing mindfulness to each section. Rather than trying to be mindful for the whole process of washing the dishes, just be mindful for *this* dish. Then *this* dish. And so on.

The key point here is to choose a routine daily activity and try to bring your full attention to it. For the most part, we do these things to get them out of the way, rather than because they hold any intrinsic interest for us. But the more we can train ourselves to stay present with what's going on, the more fully we experience our lives, and the more rewarding our experience becomes - even the mundane stuff. Give it a try and see what happens!

2: EMOTIONS AND THE BODY

WORKING WITH DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

Emotional pain is all too prevalent in the modern world. We can suffer greatly from anxiety, grief, regret, anger, worry, lack of self-esteem - the list goes on. These emotions are extremely debilitating over time, and to make matters worse they can become self-reinforcing too. The victim of panic attacks may begin to fear his own fear. Someone with a short temper may become angry with herself for getting angry.

Mindfulness offers us a way of working with difficult emotions which is simple yet powerful. The key is to bring awareness and acceptance to our embodied experience - in other words, to be mindful of what's going on for us, as we experience it in our physical bodies. By turning towards what's happening and seeing it clearly, we create space around our emotions rather than being swept away by them.

Unfortunately, we are often unwilling to look directly at our experience and see it for what it is. We have strong habits of avoidance, perhaps distracting ourselves with busyness, numbing the pain with drink or drugs, or simply refusing to admit that there's anything wrong. Unfortunately, these coping mechanisms only mask the problem rather than addressing it, and over time this can actually make matters worse.

It's important to realise that there are two aspects to any experience: the situation itself, and how we view or relate to that situation. If I stub my toe, my foot will hurt - that's the situation. But how do I react to it? Do I curse myself for being so clumsy, or wish that my foot didn't hurt even though it does? Or can I find a way to recognise and accept the situation for what it is, despite the pain? In the first case, my relationship to the pain adds negative mental activity on top of the negative physical experience. Now we have two sources of unhappiness - an unpleasant physical sensation *and* an unpleasant mental sensation. In the second case, there's just the pain itself, without the additional mental overlay - a significant portion of the unpleasantness isn't there, so the overall experience feels lighter and less difficult. As you'll discover in practice, the mental commentary is often far worse than the situation itself!

Paradoxically, then, bringing the non-judgemental awareness of mindfulness to our difficult emotions - looking at them, gently investigating to see how it feels to have this experience, without trying to change the experience at all - actually does start to change our relationship to those emotions, and, over time, brings about a powerful letting go. As the mental commentary drops away, difficult emotions don't hit us so hard and don't linger as

long. Moving the mind toward investigation also helps to pull us out of the quicksand of a negative emotional state.

Working with emotions is a delicate process, and one that requires great care, patience and self-compassion. It can be helpful to think of the way you might approach a frightened animal - an aggressive approach will only make the situation worse. Being quietly, calmly present and allowing the animal to come to you in its own time is far more helpful. In the same way, we can't resolve our difficult emotions forcefully or instantaneously - we must work patiently and gently with them each time they arise, allowing them to change at their own pace.

However, even when we approach an emotion with great care, we can still find ourselves getting swept away sometimes, particularly if we approach what's happening on the level of the mind, perhaps trying to reason our way out of it. Instead, it's more effective to work with the physical sensations in the body.

Each emotion we experience is felt in the body as well as the mind - everyone has experienced the sensation of butterflies in the stomach when feeling nervous, for example. So when difficult emotions arise, we can look to see what's going on in the body. How does it feel? Where in the body do you feel the emotion? How strong is the sensation? Is it staying the same, or changing? Does it move around? This approach allows us to turn towards the experience more easily, with less risk of getting caught up in a spiral of negative thoughts.

This may take some getting used to if you haven't worked with the body in this way before. It's quite normal to find that you aren't particularly aware of your body at first, and can't feel much going on at all. Fortunately, we can develop our body awareness with meditation techniques which focus on physical sensations, such as the one below. With time and practice, the body becomes a powerful refuge.

TECHNIQUE: BODY SCAN

In this practice, we will cultivate mindfulness and body awareness by paying attention to physical sensations in the body, moving slowly through the body one area at a time.

For a guided version of this meditation practice, see the Audio page on my website, <https://www.cheltenhamzen.co.uk/audio.html#shorter>. This practice is called '10-minute body scan' on the website.

If you don't have access to the Internet or would prefer not to use guided audio, I'll describe the practice below. It's best to read through all the instructions before getting started, rather than continually referring back to them as you're practising.

The body scan is the most elaborate of the meditation practices in this book, so it's best to use the guided audio. If that isn't an option, however, I suggest that you don't get too hung up on following the specific sequence of instructions below. The general idea is that we move our attention over the whole body, focusing on one small area at a time, starting at the top of the head and spiralling down the body until we reach the feet. The specific route isn't that important, so don't worry about getting it exactly right. So long as you cover the whole body, paying close attention to the physical sensations as you go, you're doing fine.

To begin, set yourself up in a comfortable meditation posture. If you find it very uncomfortable to sit for long periods you might prefer to do the body scan lying down; significant physical discomfort can grab the attention so much that the body scan becomes a bit disjointed. However, make sure you don't fall asleep! The body scan tends to be physically relaxing, and if that's combined with a reclining posture the body might just take it as a signal that it's time for bed.

This practice works best with the eyes closed. If you're lying down to do the body scan and you find that closing the eyes sends you to sleep, you could open them a little bit to let some light in, but I suggest not opening them fully. There's already a lot going on in this practice without adding visual distractions!

When you're ready to begin, bring your attention to the top of your head, and see what sensations you notice there. It's important that you pay attention specifically to *physical* sensations, as opposed to visualising the body parts - we're working on the physical level here, not the mental level.

You might find that you don't experience any physical sensation in some parts of the body. This is completely fine - if there's no sensation, there's no sensation, and that's as valid as any other experience. Remember, mindfulness is non-judgemental, and doesn't insist that you have any particular experience. That said, if you find it very disconcerting to have no sensation in a body part, you can gently tap the relevant area of the body a couple of times, to give yourself some sensation to work with. Just keep in mind that you aren't 'doing it wrong' if you don't feel anything - it's fine either way.

Any time you notice that your mind has wandered - you find yourself thinking about something, focusing on a different part of the body, caught up in a memory - simply notice

and acknowledge that the mind has wandered, gently let go of the distraction, and then bring your attention back to the body. Remember to adopt a non-judgemental attitude to what happens - it isn't 'good' to be paying attention to the body and 'bad' to be distracted. This practice is about seeing what happens when we attempt to pay attention to the body, however that experience unfolds.

When you've been paying attention to the top of the head for a few seconds, move on to the right side of the head - the right ear, the right cheek, the right side of the jaw - and see what you feel there. Then, when you've been paying attention to the right side of the head for a few seconds, move on to the back of the head. From there, continue to move every few seconds. Next, the left side of the head; the face (forehead, eyes, nose, mouth, chin); the right side of the neck; the back of the neck; the left side of the neck; the front of the neck; the right shoulder; the right upper arm, between the shoulder and the elbow; the right armpit; the right side of the ribcage; the area around the right shoulder blade; the area between the shoulder blades; the area around the left shoulder blade; the left side of the ribcage; the left armpit; the left shoulder; the left upper arm, between the shoulder and the elbow; the left side of the chest; the middle of the chest; the right side of the chest; the right forearm, from the elbow down to the wrist; the right side of the waist; the mid back; the left side of the waist; the left forearm, from the elbow down to the wrist; the belly; the right hip; the back of the right hand; the palm of the right hand; the thumb and fingers of the right hand; the lower back and tailbone; the left hip; the back of the left hand; the palm of the left hand; the thumb and fingers of the left hand; the lower abdomen and groin; the right buttock; the right thigh, from the hip to the knee; the left buttock; the left thigh, from the hip to the knee; the right lower leg, from the knee to the ankle; the left lower leg, from the knee to the ankle; the top of the right foot; the right heel; the sole of the right foot; the toes of the right foot; the top of the left foot; the left heel; the sole of the left foot; the toes of the left foot.

Finally, expand your attention to encompass the whole body, and rest for a few moments in the rapidly changing, shimmering sensations of the body as a single entity.

When you're ready to end the practice, bring some gentle movement back into the body - perhaps moving fingers and toes, twisting or stretching, whatever kind of movement feels good to you. In your own time, come out of your meditation posture, and then you're ready to go on with your day.

EXERCISE: FORGIVENESS

Bearing a grudge is a strange thing. Perhaps we do it because someone hurt us in the past, and we think that by bearing a grudge we'll be wiser next time and won't let it happen again. But carrying a grudge around hurts us far more than the other person - we have that burden all the time, like holding on to a hot coal, whereas the other person might even have forgotten about the incident. As the saying goes, resentment is like drinking poison and waiting for your enemy to die.

Forgiveness, the letting go of resentment, can greatly lessen our emotional burden. It's important to be clear that forgiveness is not the same as approval or acquiescence - when we forgive someone who has caused us pain, we're not saying that what they did was okay, or that they can do it again. Indeed, if we've learnt anything from the experience, we should look to avoid the same thing happening again. But we can, and should, separate out this wise response from the self-inflicted pain that comes from holding a grudge.

So here's an exercise to explore forgiveness. It helps to meditate beforehand, to settle the mind and open the heart a little; if you don't have a lot of time, even a couple of minutes sitting quietly will help. Experiment and see what works best for you. Then, when you're ready to begin the forgiveness exercise, bring to mind someone who has wronged you, and try saying 'I forgive you' (either aloud or silently, whichever you prefer). If it feels fake or unconvincing at first, stay with it for a while. You might find that you feel a shift, a letting go - or you might not! There's no need to force it or try to make something happen; it needs to be genuine to have a lasting effect. When you've either felt a shift or concluded that you aren't ready to let go with this particular person just yet, move on to another person and repeat the exercise, and so on, for as long as you like. See how much unwanted emotional baggage you can let go of - and be sure to notice how much lighter you feel afterwards!

Practised regularly and with integrity, forgiveness will transform your relationships, allowing you to move through your life with much greater ease. So stick with it - this is a powerful practice.

3: OPENING THE HEART

CULTIVATING LOVING KINDNESS AND COMPASSION

In meditation circles we talk a lot about mindfulness, non-judgemental awareness, and letting things be as they are. Mindfulness is a beautiful practice that can bring about a great deal of freedom and joy. However, we can also cultivate wholesome and beneficial qualities of the heart and mind in a more direct, deliberate way. Some people find this an easier way in to meditation, while others find that it complements and balances the other aspects of their practice.

For millennia, meditation practitioners have found ways to tap into four beautiful qualities of the heart and mind, sometimes called the ‘four immeasurables’ because of their priceless value. Since these practices have a long tradition behind them, you’ll sometimes find them called by their Pali names. (Pali is an ancient language related to Sanskrit, and is the language of the teachings of early Buddhism.) These Pali terms can be translated into English in a wide variety of ways, so I’ll give a few options below to help you figure out what’s what.

- **Metta:** Loving kindness, benevolence, well-wishing, friendliness. An open-hearted attitude of wishing happiness, good health and peace of mind for yourself and others, simply because it’s a good thing when people are happy, healthy and at peace.
- **Karuna:** Compassion. An attitude of wishing for freedom from suffering for yourself and others. Whereas metta wishes for happiness simply because happiness is a beautiful thing, compassion begins with a recognition of pain in ourselves and others, and an earnest wish for that pain to be relieved.
- **Mudita:** Sympathetic joy, empathetic joy, appreciative joy. This is a feeling of joy that arises because others are joyful, even if you had no part in causing their happiness. Our heart naturally resonates at the sight of another’s joy, and so we feel joy too. (This isn’t really a concept we have in English; it can help to think of it as the opposite of envy.)
- **Upekkha:** Equanimity, serenity, even-mindedness, stability, deep acceptance. An attitude in which we let go of all resistance to the experience that is arising in the here and now and settle into stillness. This letting go creates the freedom to choose our actions wisely rather than reacting out of habit or impulse.

Collectively, these practices are sometimes also known as the ‘Brahmaviharas’, ‘divine abodes’ or ‘heavenly abidings’, so you might see those names too. (These terms come from an early Buddhist story in which a spiritual seeker asks the Buddha how to dwell in the ‘Brahma realms’, where the gods were thought to live in ancient Indian cosmology, and the Buddha replies by teaching him these four qualities as a way of experiencing a ‘divine abiding’ in the here and now.)

In this chapter we will focus on loving kindness and compassion. Actually, though, cultivating any one of the four immeasurables deeply will naturally lead to the other three, since all four spring from the same source - an open heart. The main difference is that loving kindness practice focuses on opening the heart directly, whereas compassion gets there through the shared experience of suffering, *mudita* through the shared experience of joy, and equanimity through peace and stillness.

Having access to any one of these qualities is a profoundly powerful resource in our lives. If you habitually seek something from others - for example, you look to others for love and affection - then the best thing you can do is to cultivate that quality within yourself and offer it freely to others. Rather than seeking out external sources of warmth, you build a fire in your heart! That way, the love you’re looking for is already within you, and you’re no longer dependent on other people to give you what you need to be happy.

Although we often speak of ‘cultivating’ these qualities, what we find when we explore these practices in depth is that the four immeasurables were within us all along - it just takes a bit of practice to discover them. The Dalai Lama has described these qualities as our ‘birthright’ as human beings - they’re fundamental to the way our hearts and minds function. That said, sometimes these practices can feel cheesy or inauthentic at first, like we’re trying to *make* ourselves feel something that we don’t really believe. This is a normal reaction, actually quite common - it doesn’t make you a bad person, and it definitely doesn’t imply that you aren’t kind or compassionate! If these practices really set your teeth on edge, set them to one side for now, and maybe try again in six months (or six years!). Rest assured that the four immeasurables will be there for you when you’re ready to go looking for them.

One way to connect to these qualities in meditation is to move through a sequence of different people, offering (e.g.) loving kindness to each one in turn. So you might start with yourself, then move on to a benefactor (someone who has helped or supported you in some way), then a friend, followed by a casual acquaintance or another more ‘neutral’ person, and finally a difficult person, perhaps concluding your practice by offering loving kindness to all living beings. Sadly, some people in the West find it extremely difficult to feel kindness and

compassion for themselves, so if that's the case for you, experiment with putting yourself last rather than first - but do still include yourself! It may take time, but eventually the ice will melt. Including yourself can also help to counterbalance the emphasis in our society on the virtue of self-sacrifice. Looking after others is a beautiful thing, but it can be taken too far, leading to neglecting your own well-being. Giving to others is a beautiful act, but you're important too. As the saying goes, put on your own oxygen mask before helping others! I've included both approaches in the guided meditations below.

As you move from one person to the next, you can employ a variety of techniques to cultivate the heart-mind quality you're working with. One approach is to repeat certain phrases silently: 'may you be happy, may you be free from suffering'. Holding someone in mind whilst saying these phrases sincerely can allow you to tap into the emotional feeling of whichever quality you're working with. An alternative for people who are more visually oriented is to work with a mental image, such as visualising a golden light shining in your heart and radiating out to the other person. Or you might find you can simply tap into a physical sense of these qualities in the body and stay with the feeling, allowing it to grow and develop over time. I've offered a selection of approaches below, so you can try them out and see what works best for you.

TECHNIQUE: HEART MEDITATIONS

In the following practices, we will explore heart-opening through two of the four immeasurables that we've discussed in this chapter: loving kindness and compassion. We'll consider two different approaches, one using phrases which evoke the attitudes of kindness and compassion, the other using visualisations. Try them both and see which you prefer.

For guided versions of these meditation practices, see the Audio page on my website, <https://www.cheltenhamzen.co.uk/audio.html#shorter>. Each audio file is labelled with the heart quality being cultivated and the approach taken to do so. For example, the visualisation-based loving kindness practice is called '10-minute loving kindness - visualisation'.

If you don't have access to the Internet or would prefer not to use guided audio, I'll describe the practices below. It's best to read through all the instructions before getting started, rather than continually referring back to them as you're practising.

When you've chosen which practice you'd like to do, proceed as follows:

- *Loving kindness using phrases*

To begin, set yourself up in a comfortable meditation posture. Now bring to mind a benefactor; someone who has helped you or shown you kindness. Take a moment to select someone suitable. If nobody comes to mind, you can choose anyone for whom it's relatively easy for you to feel a sense of warmth.

Now, take a moment to reflect. It's good to be happy, isn't it? It's a nice feeling to be happy. And it would be nice for your benefactor to be happy too. (This isn't to say that they're necessarily *unhappy* right now; it's simply a wish that they be happy, no strings attached.)

To help to open up to a sense of wishing this person well, silently say to yourself the following phrase: 'May you be happy.' Then rest for a moment in the feeling of wishing the person well. When you're ready, say the next phrase: 'May you be well.' Again, rest in the feeling of wishing the person well. Then, the third phrase: 'May you be at peace.' Again, rest in the feeling of well-wishing.

Spend a few minutes slowly repeating these phrases. If you find that you get distracted, simply notice that the mind has wandered, gently let go of the distraction, and then bring your attention back to the cultivation of loving kindness by repeating one of the phrases.

When you're ready to move on, bring to mind a close friend, someone whom you feel positively towards. Then repeat the phrases again for a few minutes. 'May you be happy.' 'May you be well.' 'May you be at peace.'

Next, bring to mind someone who you don't feel particularly positive or negative about, perhaps a casual acquaintance, someone you see every day but don't really know, or anyone else who is basically 'neutral'. Then repeat the phrases again for a few minutes. 'May you be happy.' 'May you be well.' 'May you be at peace.'

Now bring to mind a difficult person. If you haven't done this before, try someone who is a little bit difficult, rather than your worst enemy. Then repeat the phrases again for a minute or so. 'May you be happy.' 'May you be well.' 'May you be at peace.'

Finally, bring yourself to mind. You're as deserving of happiness, good health and peace as anyone else! So, keeping yourself in mind, repeat the following slightly modified phrases for a few minutes. 'May I be happy.' 'May I be well.' 'May I be at peace.'

When you're ready to end the practice, bring some gentle movement back into the body - perhaps moving fingers and toes, twisting or stretching, whatever kind of movement feels

good to you. In your own time, come out of your meditation posture, and then you're ready to go on with your day.

- *Loving kindness using visualisation*

To begin, set yourself up in a comfortable meditation posture. Now bring to mind a benefactor; someone who has helped you or shown you kindness. Take a moment to select someone suitable. If nobody comes to mind, you can choose anyone for whom it's relatively easy for you to feel a sense of warmth.

Now, take a moment to reflect. It's good to be happy, isn't it? It's a nice feeling to be happy. And it would be nice for your benefactor to be happy too. (This isn't to say that they're necessarily *unhappy* right now; it's simply a wish that they be happy, no strings attached.)

To help to open up to a sense of wishing this person well, visualise the person standing in front of you, and imagine a golden light shining in your heart. The golden light is warming and soothing; it brings joy and peace to whomever it shines on. Allow the golden light of your heart to shine on your benefactor, warming, soothing and filling them with peace and happiness.

Spend a few minutes visualising this golden light shining on your benefactor, and see the effect this has. If you find that you get distracted, simply notice that the mind has wandered, gently let go of the distraction, and then bring your attention back to the cultivation of loving kindness by visualising the golden light from your heart shining on your benefactor once again.

When you're ready to move on, bring to mind a close friend, someone whom you feel positively towards. Then allow the golden light from your heart to shine on this person too, warming, soothing and filling them with peace and happiness. Again, spend a few minutes sharing the light of your heart with this person.

Next, bring to mind someone who you don't feel particularly positive or negative about, perhaps a casual acquaintance, someone you see every day but don't really know, or anyone else who is basically 'neutral'. Then allow the golden light from your heart to shine on this person too, warming, soothing and filling them with peace and happiness. Again, spend a few minutes sharing the light of your heart with this person.

Now bring to mind a difficult person. If you haven't done this before, try someone who is a little bit difficult, rather than your worst enemy. Then allow the golden light from your

heart to shine on this person too, warming, soothing and filling them with peace and happiness. Spend a minute or so sharing the light of your heart with this person too.

Finally, notice that the golden light is shining from within your own heart. You're as deserving of happiness, good health and peace as anyone else! So notice that the golden light from your heart is also warming, soothing and filling *you* with peace and happiness. Spend a few minutes allowing the light in your heart to continue to shine, illuminating your whole being.

When you're ready to end the practice, bring some gentle movement back into the body - perhaps moving fingers and toes, twisting or stretching, whatever kind of movement feels good to you. In your own time, come out of your meditation posture, and then you're ready to go on with your day.

- *Compassion using phrases*

To begin, set yourself up in a comfortable meditation posture.

Take a moment to reflect that stress, unhappiness, vexation and discontent are universal experiences. We all suffer from time to time, in countless ways. These experiences are unpleasant, often deeply so. As we reflect on this, we can form the earnest wish that this suffering be relieved.

Reflect on your own sources of suffering. Wouldn't it be good if that suffering could be relieved, even just for a little while?

To help to open to this heartfelt wish for freedom from suffering, silently say to yourself the following phrase: 'May I be free from suffering.' Then rest for a moment in the feeling of wishing that your suffering might be relieved. When you're ready, say the next phrase: 'May I be free from pain and sorrow.' Again, rest in the feeling of compassion. Then, the third phrase: 'May I be held in compassion.' Again, rest in the feeling of compassion.

Spend a few minutes slowly repeating these phrases. If you find that you get distracted, simply notice that the mind has wandered, gently let go of the distraction, and then bring your attention back to the cultivation of compassion by repeating one of the phrases.

Now bring to mind a benefactor; someone who has helped you or shown you kindness. Take a moment to select someone suitable. If nobody comes to mind, you can choose anyone for whom it's relatively easy for you to feel a sense of warmth. Then repeat the following

slightly modified phrases again for a few minutes. 'May you be free from suffering.' 'May you be free from pain and sorrow.' 'May you be held in compassion.'

When you're ready to move on, bring to mind a close friend, someone whom you feel positively towards. Then repeat the phrases again for a few minutes. 'May you be free from suffering.' 'May you be free from pain and sorrow.' 'May you be held in compassion.'

Next, bring to mind someone who you don't feel particularly positive or negative about, perhaps a casual acquaintance, someone you see every day but don't really know, or anyone else who is basically 'neutral'. Then repeat the phrases again for a few minutes. 'May you be free from suffering.' 'May you be free from pain and sorrow.' 'May you be held in compassion.'

Finally, bring to mind a difficult person. If you haven't done this before, try someone who is a little bit difficult, rather than your worst enemy. Then repeat the phrases again for a minute or so. 'May you be free from suffering.' 'May you be free from pain and sorrow.' 'May you be held in compassion.'

When you're ready to end the practice, bring some gentle movement back into the body - perhaps moving fingers and toes, twisting or stretching, whatever kind of movement feels good to you. In your own time, come out of your meditation posture, and then you're ready to go on with your day.

- *Compassion using visualisation*

To begin, set yourself up in a comfortable meditation posture.

Take a moment to reflect that stress, unhappiness, vexation and discontent are universal experiences. We all suffer from time to time, in countless ways. These experiences are unpleasant, often deeply so. As we reflect on this, we can form the earnest wish that this suffering be relieved.

Reflect on your own sources of suffering. Wouldn't it be good if that suffering could be relieved, even just for a little while?

To help to open to this heartfelt wish for freedom from suffering, imagine that the suffering you experience can be seen as a dark cloud surrounding you. Now visualise a golden light shining in your heart. This is the light of compassion, and as it shines it begins to dispel the dark cloud of suffering. As the light continues to shine, the cloud slowly but

surely disperses, leaving you free from suffering, free from pain and sorrow, held in the warm golden light of compassion.

Spend a few minutes visualising this golden light shining from your heart, dispelling the dark cloud of suffering, and see the effect this has. If you find that you get distracted, simply notice that the mind has wandered, gently let go of the distraction, and then bring your attention back to the cultivation of compassion by visualising the golden light from your heart shining through the dark cloud of suffering once again.

Now bring to mind a benefactor; someone who has helped you or shown you kindness. Take a moment to select someone suitable. If nobody comes to mind, you can choose anyone for whom it's relatively easy for you to feel a sense of warmth. Now picture this person in front of you, and notice that they too have a dark cloud of suffering surrounding them. Allow the golden light from your heart to shine on this person, and see that here, too, the light begins to dispel and disperse the dark cloud. Spend a few minutes visualising the golden light of compassion from your heart shining on this person, warming and comforting them.

When you're ready to move on, bring to mind a close friend, someone whom you feel positively towards. Then picture this person, and allow the golden light of compassion from your heart to disperse their dark cloud of suffering too. Spend a few minutes visualising the golden light of compassion from your heart shining on this person, warming and comforting them.

Next, bring to mind someone who you don't feel particularly positive or negative about, perhaps a casual acquaintance, someone you see every day but don't really know, or anyone else who is basically 'neutral'. Then picture this person, and allow the golden light of compassion from your heart to disperse their dark cloud of suffering too. Spend a few minutes visualising the golden light of compassion from your heart shining on this person, warming and comforting them.

Finally, bring to mind a difficult person. If you haven't done this before, try someone who is a little bit difficult, rather than your worst enemy. Then picture this person, and allow the golden light of compassion from your heart to disperse their dark cloud of suffering too. Spend a few minutes visualising the golden light of compassion from your heart shining on this person, warming and comforting them.

When you're ready to end the practice, bring some gentle movement back into the body - perhaps moving fingers and toes, twisting or stretching, whatever kind of movement feels

good to you. In your own time, come out of your meditation posture, and then you're ready to go on with your day.

EXERCISE: GRATITUDE

Gratitude is a beautiful feeling. It connects us to those around us, and makes us feel good (and, if you express gratitude aloud to someone, it often makes them feel good too).

It can be very helpful to cultivate gratitude in an intentional way. At the end of each day, before going to sleep, think back over your day and identify a few things that you're grateful for. These can be big or small, whatever comes to mind. Find at least three; if you're feeling ambitious, you could aim for five or even ten. You can write them down, tell them to someone, or simply note them silently to yourself. (If you write them down, it's good to read them back to yourself every so often and remember all the things you were grateful for. You might be pleasantly surprised!)

This practice has a nice way of counteracting the mind's natural tendency to focus on the negative episodes in our lives and gloss over the positive ones. Over time the mind starts to notice and remember more of the good things throughout the day, and overall we start to see our lives in a more positive way and enjoy each day more fully. Don't be tempted to skip this exercise - it really works!

4: INSIGHT AND SELF-INQUIRY

DISCOVERING YOUR TRUE NATURE

Knowledge is power - and that goes double for self-knowledge. The better we understand ourselves, the more capacity we have to make wise choices and navigate life's inevitable ups and downs with skill and grace.

Meditation offers a powerful way to experience deeply transformative insights into ourselves. Applying simple techniques such as the self-inquiry practice described in this chapter, we can shine a light on our experience, illuminating aspects of ourselves which we aren't consciously aware of.

Through meditative self-exploration, mental patterns come to light which help us to understand our own behaviours more fully. You might notice a tendency toward self-criticism, for example, and find that this holds you back from engaging wholeheartedly in certain activities. You might find habitual trains of thought which regularly lead you to feel bad, either about yourself or someone else. Or perhaps you define yourself in a limiting way - for example, as a person who lacks confidence and thus can't talk to new people - as a result of which you subtly change your behaviour in ways that reinforces that self-definition (e.g. by avoiding situations where you'll meet new people).

Many of these mental patterns are so deeply ingrained that at first we don't even really know they're there, yet they guide our behaviour from behind the scenes. Without even knowing it, our choices are being made for us by unconscious mental habits. Once we see these habits for what they are, we can begin to 'catch them in the act' and make a different choice - for example, if you recognise that a particular train of thought always leads to a certain negative place, then when you notice that thought pattern starting to come up, you can step in and consciously change where you're headed. Like magic tricks which lose their power to enchant us once we know how they're done, our mental patterns can no longer pull our strings once we've fully seen through them.

Central to this process of investigation is understanding who we really are, on many levels.

At the level of the personality, we tend to have certain fixed ideas about who we are - we're this or that type of person, we always do this and not that, and so on. But even a little investigation quickly reveals how fluid our self-concepts are in practice, as we move from one role to the next depending on who we're with and what relationship we have to them.

For example, over the last few days I've been a friend, a son, a team leader, a teacher and an employee, to name just a few. Each of these roles places different demands on me and comes with the expectation of a different set of behaviours, and in some cases even different ways of dressing and speaking. As we go through a typical week, we shift from one role to another many times. Some of these shifts are effortless, while some are much more challenging.

These roles are not inherently good or bad by themselves; they're useful vehicles to help us relate to one another. But sometimes our relationship to our roles can be a problem. Sometimes a role demands something of us that we can't give at that moment. Sometimes we find ourselves stuck in roles that have outlived their usefulness, unable to move on. Learning to understand that roles are just roles, temporary masks that we wear when they're useful and discard when they aren't, nothing more or less than that, and to be conscious of the process of inhabiting these roles in our own lives, brings about a great release from the stress brought on by clinging to our sense of identity too tightly.

(You might like to think about which roles you find yourself playing as you go through life. Which ones do you find particularly stressful, and why? Are there roles which you struggle to let go of, even when they're no longer appropriate? Are there roles which you have to force yourself to play?)

Going beyond the personality level, some of the deepest insights available to us in meditation practice concern more fundamental aspects of how our minds work. We begin to see the thoughts, feelings, memories and intentions which we weave together in each moment to construct our sense of identity and the stories we tell ourselves about what's going on. As we see deeply into this process, many of our fears and worries are seen to be nothing but paper tigers - perhaps terrifying at first, but completely harmless, even amusing, when viewed from the right perspective. These insights have the power to change our relationship to our own experience in profound ways, leading to significantly greater freedom and well-being. We also see how contingent our experience is on everything else around us, how connected we are to everyone and everything else - we let go of the sense of ourselves as small, separate beings struggling to find our place in the world and embrace our interconnected nature, which simultaneously relieves much of our personal burden of suffering, and enables us to help others with their own burdens with much greater ease. (This is the process sometimes called 'awakening' or 'enlightenment' in spiritual circles. In Zen we talk about 'kensho', or 'seeing one's true nature'. If you find the spiritual language off-putting, however, you can simply think of this as a progression toward ever-greater self-knowledge.)

So how do we go about discovering these transformative insights? Given the title of this book, it probably won't come as a shock that I'm going to suggest that we meditate...

Many meditation techniques are specifically designed to lead to insight. The key elements are to set up an environment in which the mind can become quieter, making it easier to see what's happening, and then to encourage a careful examination of whatever arises. It's vital to have a sense of investigation or inquiry, a genuine exploration of experience, rather than a dry, rote repetition of a technique - we need the mind to be open, willing to experience something new, rather than simply re-treading well-worn paths.

One sticking point for people raised in the rational, analytical philosophy of Western society is that we aren't trying to *think* our way to insight, to analyse ourselves and come up with a clever way of understanding what's happening. While it's possible to come up with what might be called 'intellectual insights', these are typically rather abstract and unconvincing, lacking the power to change our lives. We've all had the feeling of 'knowing' that we *ought* to do something, but somehow not quite getting around to it!

Insights are more powerful if they're *experienced* directly - seen and felt at the deepest level. So rather than thinking in some specially 'insightful' way, we use a meditative technique to 'stir' the mind, then pay close attention to see what bubbles up in response, allowing the insights to come to us intuitively.

One very effective way to generate insight is to work with a question in meditation. Since we've been focusing on self-knowledge in this chapter, we're going to work with a question which gets straight to the heart of the matter: 'Who am I?'

TECHNIQUE: WHO AM I?

In this practice, we will inquire into the nature of the self by working with the question 'Who am I?'

For a guided version of this meditation practice, see the Audio page on my website, <https://www.cheltenhamzen.co.uk/audio.html#shorter>. This practice is called '10-minute self-inquiry (who am I?)' on the website.

If you don't have access to the Internet or would prefer not to use guided audio, I'll describe the practice below. It's best to read through all the instructions before getting started, rather than continually referring back to them as you're practising.

To begin, set yourself up in a comfortable meditation posture. Bring your attention to the physical sensations of your breathing for a few breaths, to allow the mind to settle and to prepare for the meditation practice. Then allow your awareness to expand and relax, so that you're open to whatever might arise as the practice unfolds, without focusing on anything in particular. This open, receptive space of awareness provides a container in which anything at all might arise, and can be seen clearly and without judgement. Rest here for a few breaths, simply allowing your experience to unfold.

When you're ready to begin the inquiry, on your next out-breath, silently ask yourself 'Who am I?' It's important that there's a genuine sense of questioning, of curiosity to know the answer, rather than repeating the words in a dry, rote way. The words themselves are not magical - it's the question behind the words which is the essence of this practice.

Ordinarily, when we are working with a question, we try to think up an answer using logic and reasoning. There's an active quality to that approach, a sense of being in control of the process of 'figuring out' the right answer.

This practice is different. We ask the question, but rather than trying to answer it directly, we simply rest in the open, receptive space of awareness and see what answers come back to us. An answer might take the form of a thought, an emotion, a mental image, a sight, a sound, a sensation in the body, or anything else - or there might be no answer at all. Whatever happens is fine! However, no matter what answer we get, we don't get involved with it - if an interesting thought comes back in response to the question, we don't then start actively thinking about it. We simply observe whatever comes up in response, non-judgementally, and then let it go.

On the next out-breath, we ask the question again: 'Who am I?' On the in-breath, we rest in open, receptive awareness, observing our experience carefully to see what arises in response to the question. On the next out-breath, we ask again, and so on.

Sometimes the answers that come up may seem bizarre or irrelevant. Sometimes the answers may seem compelling or even urgent, something that you absolutely *must* think about right now rather than letting it slip away. Sometimes it may seem like nothing at all is coming up. All of this is fine, and we respond to all of it in exactly the same way: seeing clearly how it is, allowing it to be exactly as it is without getting involved, and continuing to ask the question. This practice has a way of separating the wheat from the chaff - over time the irrelevant stuff will fall away and we'll be left with what's truly meaningful. Whatever is of genuine value will stay with us, even as we let it go.

When you're ready to end the practice, bring some gentle movement back into the body - perhaps moving fingers and toes, twisting or stretching, whatever kind of movement feels good to you. In your own time, come out of your meditation posture, and then you're ready to go on with your day.

EXERCISE: LEARNING FROM DISCONTENT

Another potent source of insight is to look at what makes us discontented in some way. A simple way to do this is to take stock at the end of each day: look back over the day's events and make a note of three or more things which caused you stress or displeasure. Over time, patterns will tend to emerge, and you'll notice particular themes in your life which lead to negative experiences and mental states. Once you understand these clearly, you can start to find ways to address them. You'll also notice which things *don't* recur - which episodes seemed like a big deal at the time but in the grand scheme of things aren't worth worrying about. As the saying goes, don't sweat the small stuff - which is much easier to do with a new sense of perspective on which things are 'small stuff'!

A more powerful way to develop wisdom is to go one step beyond merely listing episodes of discontent, and actually investigate them. What's going on here? Why does this particular event make you annoyed, uneasy, upset, or whatever it might be? Is there a sense that things *shouldn't* have happened that way? If so, what did you think *should* have happened? And why did you think it should be that way? What beliefs are operating here? And what is your role in all of this?

My teacher's teacher once commented that whenever we experience discontent, we should ask ourselves what we can learn from it. If we learn nothing, then it's a wasted opportunity - just an unpleasant experience. But if we can see it clearly for what it is and learn something about ourselves in the process, then the unpleasant experience was a catalyst for the development of wisdom, and in that sense is a cause for celebration. It's sometimes said that we should be very grateful to those people who we find the most annoying, because they have the most to teach us!

When doing this investigation, it's important to be gentle with yourself - don't force yourself to look at something which is unbearably uncomfortable. But the more you can start to explore what gives rise to discontent in your life, the more you'll begin to discover the roots of that discontent - which might not be what you thought. Ultimately, deep enough insight into the mechanism underlying the experience of discontent can free us from it completely.

5: STABILITY AND FOCUS

CALMING THE MIND

The ability to focus, to pay sustained attention to something without getting distracted, is a vital asset in meditation, and in life in general. It's hard to get anything done if our minds are constantly wandering! Fortunately, focus is a skill that we can improve through practice, and meditation is a great way to do that.

In meditation circles, training the mind to focus is usually referred to as 'concentration practice', but for some people the word 'concentration' conjures up ideas of striving, frown lines and tension, so it's more helpful to think of focus in terms of mental stillness or stability; training the mind to come to rest in a gentle, easeful way rather than forcibly restraining it. Indeed, when this skill is highly developed it feels as though the mind is 'resting' on the object or task, and we experience inner stillness and tranquillity. (As a result you'll sometimes hear this practice called 'calm abiding'.)

It turns out that the mind likes to be still, quiet and stable, but it takes some time and practice to get used to the idea. We are bombarded with new information and experiences, hyper-stimulated by adverts, music, television and the general busyness of modern society. This leaves our minds in a constant whirl of novelty, never able to rest for a minute, and so the mind ends up forever jumping from one thing to the next, never settling anywhere, like a hyper-caffeinated monkey swinging through a forest. When the mind is finally allowed to come to rest, however, we find that the resulting experience of peace and stillness is deeply enjoyable and profoundly nourishing. Over time and with practice, this comes to be experienced as a source of inner well-being - a place inside ourselves that we can go to experience joy and contentment, rather than always having to look outside ourselves for sources of pleasure.

Focus is vitally important for sitting meditation, but it also has many applications beyond formal meditation. We live a great deal of our lives fretting about the future, regretting the past or caught up in ideas about how things ought to be rather than how they actually are. So much of this mental activity is not at all useful, and it's a huge relief to let go of it. To counterbalance this tendency in ourselves, we can learn to ground ourselves in the present moment. Being present enables us to see what's going on more calmly and clearly, and to choose wiser responses to the situations that arise rather than simply reacting out of habit.

Sitting meditation is one way to strengthen our ability to focus, but we can also use movement to explore focus and grounding together. Keeping in touch with the physical

sensations in the body is a great way to stay grounded in the present moment, and you can practise tuning in to the body at any time. For example, next time you're walking somewhere, slow down just a little bit and bring your attention to the physical sensations of the walking - your feet pressing on the ground, the air moving past your skin. It's important to be aware of your surroundings, of course, but learning to do that whilst remaining in touch with what's going on in your body, rather than being 'pulled out' into those external stimuli all the time, is a powerful way to stay grounded. Later on in this chapter we'll also discuss walking meditation, which is a more formal way to cultivate focus using a movement-based practice.

A third, related, skill is what we might call embodiment. Embodiment is about how we live: how we can act from a place of authenticity, congruence and integrity, how we honour and express our deepest intentions and truths. It takes a lot to be fully embodied! Without the ability to remain grounded in the face of whatever life throws at us, we don't have a chance. We also need a great deal of inner clarity (which we can reach through insight practices such as self-inquiry), and the integrity to be honest with ourselves about what we want to say and do and how we want to go about it. Finally, it takes courage! Expressing that which is deepest within us can feel risky and vulnerable. But it's also hugely rewarding, and over time you'll develop a profound sense of confidence as you learn to recognise and operate from that which is most meaningful to you, and the people around you will instinctively recognise and respond to that inner confidence.

To get started, then, let's take a look at a meditative technique for developing focus.

TECHNIQUE: FOCUSING ON A CANDLE FLAME

In this practice, we will train our ability to pay attention in a sustained way by using a candle flame.

For a guided version of this meditation practice, see the Audio page on my website, <https://www.cheltenhamzen.co.uk/audio.html#shorter>. This practice is called '10-minute concentration' on the website. That being said, guided concentration meditation is a bit of a contradiction in terms - concentration meditation is all about staying with an object to the exclusion of everything else, and the instructions given in the guided audio will tend to pull your attention away from the object and onto the instruction, which quickly becomes counterproductive! It's perhaps best to treat the guided audio as a periodic nudge to make sure you're still paying attention to the flame and haven't become distracted. After you've used the guided audio once or twice, try doing this practice without the guide.

If you don't have access to the Internet or would prefer not to use guided audio, I'll describe the practice below. It's best to read through all the instructions before getting started, rather than continually referring back to them as you're practising.

To do this practice, you'll need a candle. (If you don't have access to a candle, a video of a candle flame will also work.) Set it up so that it's close to you and a little bit below your eye level, so that you're looking slightly down toward the flame, but don't have to bend your neck forward or hunch to see it. Take a moment to settle into a comfortable meditation posture, making sure that you won't need to move to adjust the candle as you go on with the practice.

Now bring your attention to the candle flame, and simply observe it. Whenever you notice that your attention has wandered away from the flame, return to the flame. Allow yourself to blink normally - there's no need to force the eyes to stay open the whole time. Just keep watching the flame, and over time the mind will settle all by itself. And that's it.

If you're wondering how this is different from a mindfulness practice, the key distinction is that mindfulness practices have a sense of curiosity or investigation, looking to see what's going on in the totality of your experience as you continue to meditate. The object of focus in a mindfulness practice serves as an anchor to help us notice when we've become distracted, but in many ways the wandering mind is just as interesting and relevant as the object itself. In concentration practice, the only thing in the universe that matters is the object. There's no need for curiosity or investigation, no need to pay any attention at all to where the mind goes when it wanders - simply come back to the object, again and again. In that sense, concentration is a simpler practice than mindfulness.

When you're ready to end the practice, bring some gentle movement back into the body - perhaps moving fingers and toes, twisting or stretching, whatever kind of movement feels good to you. In your own time, come out of your meditation posture, and then you're ready to go on with your day.

Sometimes people find that they feel a bit strange during this practice, or occasionally shortly afterwards - a sense of being very light or very heavy, tingly, a bit spaced out, that sort of thing. All of this is completely fine and normal - it's a sign that the mind is settling down and letting go of some of its usual mental activity, which can result in your experience feeling a bit odd for a little while. It generally goes away very quickly afterwards, but do bear this in mind if you're about to drive a car on a fast road! If you have any concerns at all about this practice, stop it immediately and talk to a teacher before continuing.

EXERCISE: WALKING MEDITATION

As I mentioned earlier, walking is one of the four classical postures for meditation (the others being sitting, lying down and standing). Pretty much any meditation technique can be practised while walking; the main difference is that you need a bit more space to move around for walking meditation.

Walking meditation should be distinguished from walking mindfully. Walking mindfully is like doing anything else mindfully - you perform the activity normally, paying close attention to the details of the activity in the present moment, maintaining a non-judgemental attitude. In other words, it's a mindfulness practice, in which you're being mindful of walking. Walking meditation, on the other hand, is a formal meditation practice which involves working with a specific technique whilst walking; depending on the technique, you might or might not be paying much attention to the walking itself. (For example, you can perform the phrase-based compassion meditation from chapter 3 as a walking meditation; then you're repeating the phrases and paying attention to the feeling of compassion being directed toward a series of people, rather than focusing on the sensations of the walking.)

Since walking meditation is a formal practice, we need to pick a specific route to walk. The most common approach is to pick a path roughly 20-30 paces in length. You'll walk slowly along the path, then carefully and deliberately stop when you get to the end. Turn around slowly and carefully, then stop again. Finally, resume walking back along the path. (The extra care at each end of the path is because the mind is most likely to wander when you're turning.) The other standard approach is to pick a circular route (e.g. around the edges of a room or a small pond) so that you can walk continuously without needing to stop and turn around.

Almost any meditation technique can be performed while walking; however, it's tricky to gaze at a candle flame while you're on the move! Instead, it works well to bring your attention to the soles of your feet as you walk. Slow down, and break each step down into stages - lifting the foot, moving the foot, placing it down again. Lifting, moving, placing. Lifting, moving, placing. At the end of the path, turning, turning, turning. Then back to lifting, moving, placing. Doing this slowly and carefully is a great way to encourage the mind to focus. Give it a try!

6: BEING AND TIMELESSNESS

LETTING GO OF TIME PRESSURE

In this chapter we're going to take a look at our relationship to time and the stress that we experience as a result. We'll also look at an approach to practice which has nothing to do with 'cultivation', 'development' or 'achievement' of any kind - a mode of experience which is much more about simply *being*, just as we are.

The passage of time is central to our lived experience, and although it seems very concrete and objective when measured with a stopwatch, our subjective sense of it is surprisingly elastic. Time flies when we're having fun, yet a watched pot never boils.

For some of us, there's never enough time in the day. We suffer from 'hurry sickness' - forever rushing from one task to the next, always thinking about everything that still needs to be done, never giving our full attention to what we're doing right now. For others among us, time weighs heavily; the minutes and hours crawl by slowly, the long days seeming to drag on forever. Both of these extremes are deeply unpleasant and stressful, and represent what we might call 'time pressure' - the uncomfortable sense that we have the wrong amount of time for our needs, whether not enough or too much.

Since time is such a significant part of our experience, it's helpful to look at our relationship to time pressure - what types of time pressure do you experience, and under what conditions? If you're prone to hurry sickness, can you simplify your life, be more realistic about what you can hope to get done in a day and stop piling the pressure on yourself? Or if time seems to drag, what could you introduce into your lives which might enrich your experience and help to ease the passage of time?

While these are good questions to ask, simply doing less or more isn't the only way to manage time pressure. We can also examine our relationship to the things we *already* do, and transform those activities in ways that greatly relieve time pressure, making our experience simultaneously simpler and more rewarding.

In the second half of the 20th century, the Hungarian psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi became interested in studying what he called 'optimal experience'. He observed that the psychologists of the day tended to focus on the negative, on what could go wrong and how it might be treated. Csíkszentmihályi was interested in the opposite - what factors contributed to positive experiences and to a sense of general well-being.

His research led him to speak to thousands of people across all walks of life from all around the world, and he found tremendous similarities in the way that these people described their optimal experiences regardless of their backgrounds. Many of the people he spoke to described a flowing quality to those moments in their lives which were the most rewarding - a sense that each action followed the last smoothly, naturally and effortlessly - and so Csíkszentmihályi began using the term 'flow' to describe optimal experience.

Flow states come about most commonly when someone is engaged in a challenging activity which provides immediate feedback and is toward the upper limit of the skill of the practitioner, but not out of reach. (Think of a skilled acrobat performing a technically sophisticated routine, a concert pianist performing a very difficult piece, or someone completely engrossed in a fast-paced video game.) There's a fine balance between the skill level of the performer and the challenge of the activity - too difficult, and the task becomes stressful rather than engaging; too easy, and it becomes boring. Somewhere in the middle is the sweet spot where flow happens.

The flow experience has a number of interesting characteristics:

- A distorted sense of time, or no sense of time at all - in other words, an absence of time pressure.
- Little or no sense of self - the performer and the activity merge into one seamless experience.
- Intense, focused concentration on the present moment - being fully present for the activity.
- A sense that the activity is intrinsically rewarding - in other words, it's inherently enjoyable, worth doing simply for the sake of doing it, not for any other reason.

So the flow state offers an escape from time pressure. If we can become wholeheartedly engaged in an activity for its own sake, we become so focused on the present moment that all of our attention is taken up with what's happening here and now, and there's no spare capacity left over to be checking our to-do lists or watching the second hand crawling around the clock.

Any activity offers the possibility of flow if taken seriously enough, and Csíkszentmihályi's excellent book 'Flow: the Psychology of Happiness' explores this in great detail. One activity that he specifically mentions in the book as being well suited to the flow experience is meditation. We are given a technique to apply which requires the practitioner

to pay close attention to the present moment, alert to the mind's wandering, which is a tricky thing to do. When you first begin to meditate, it can take a while to notice that the mind has wandered, so the 'feedback' isn't immediate at first, but as your skill develops you'll get better at staying with the technique and noticing more quickly when the mind drifts away. With time and practice, we move closer to that complete engagement in which the meditator and the meditation become one. Indeed, a sense of oneness with all things is often considered a goal of meditation practice.

All that being said, if you're already prone to 'hurry sickness' and trying to do too much, you might be feeling overwhelmed at this point, with all this talk of intense focus, challenging activities and goals to achieve. Is there another way to escape from time pressure, without having to work even harder than we already do?

Some meditation techniques do indeed appear to focus on 'doing' - cultivating a quality, developing a skill, investigating a question. But there's another, equally valid, approach to meditation, one which focuses much more on 'being' than 'doing'. In this style, we are invited to settle back into our own experience and simply allow it to unfold, as we calmly observe it. Little by little, the mind comes to rest as it lets go of unnecessary agitation and activity, all by itself - no need for us to do anything at all. Think of the mind like a jar of muddy water that has been shaken up, so the water is dark, murky and swirling. By placing the jar down on a table and leaving it alone, the mud naturally settles to the bottom of the jar, and the water becomes clear. Our only 'job' here is to refrain from shaking the jar up again - to allow the jar simply to be.

The catch here is that not doing anything at all is quite difficult at first! In meditation circles, our usual mind-state is nicknamed the 'monkey mind' because it likes to grab on to whatever comes up, as if it's swinging through the branches of a forest. In order for the mind to come to rest, we need to set up conditions which allow ourselves to relax, open up and let go. Whenever we notice that the mind has become caught up in something - a train of thought, a strong emotion, a memory, whatever it might be - we simply let go of it. So in the early stages of this style of practice, we do still need to stay alert and step in actively from time to time to encourage the mind to let go. But, as the practice deepens, the effort required to keep the mind oriented toward letting go becomes less and less, and the mind rests more easily in the stillness and clarity of our natural awareness. And as this stillness and clarity grows deeper and more profound, we settle into a sense of simple presence, alive and aware here and now; a simple, beautiful space of experience unfolding where time pressure has no hold on us.

This type of practice, sometimes called ‘open awareness’ or ‘just sitting’, is a beautiful and profound form of meditation with tremendous power. It can take a bit of getting used to, however.

Sometimes people aren’t entirely sure what they’re supposed to be ‘doing’, or wonder if they’re doing it correctly, because it can feel like you aren’t actually doing anything. It can be helpful to think of this practice as ‘resting in awareness’. If you are in the present moment, aware of the moment-to-moment comings and goings of sights, sounds, thoughts, physical feelings and whatever else is going on, without being tangled up in anything in particular, you’re already doing the practice, and nothing else needs to be done at all - simply continue as you are. If you find yourself thinking about your next holiday, your monkey mind has grabbed hold of something that looks fun - but at the point when you *notice* that you’ve been thinking about your holiday, you’ve already stepped back into awareness and freed yourself from the train of thought, without having to *do* anything, so you can return to resting right away. That’s really all there is to it.

The other challenge is what’s sometimes called the ‘near enemy’ of open awareness practice, which is a state of mental dullness. This is a kind of ‘sinking’ or ‘drifting’, a vague, hazy state in which the mind is subtly turned *away* from what’s going on - a switching off or zoning out. It can feel vaguely pleasant to drift in this way, a little like dozing, but it isn’t particularly helpful from a meditative standpoint, and it won’t bring the same benefits that come from cultivating true open awareness. When doing this practice, your mind should be clear and bright, your attention turned toward your experience in all its fullness. If the mind isn’t clear, you’re probably drifting into dullness, so take a moment to restore your alertness before continuing. Don’t zone out!

TECHNIQUE: OPEN AWARENESS

In this practice, we will rest in the stillness and clarity of the mind’s natural state.

For a guided version of this meditation practice, see the Audio page on my website, <https://www.cheltenhamzen.co.uk/audio.html#shorter>. This practice is called ‘10-minute open awareness’ on the website.

If you don’t have access to the Internet or would prefer not to use guided audio, I’ll describe the practice below. It’s best to read through all the instructions before getting started, rather than continually referring back to them as you’re practising.

To begin, set yourself up in a comfortable meditation posture. This practice tends to work best with the eyes open or half-open, but feel free to experiment and see what works for you. If the eyes are open, make sure your gaze is soft, and that you aren't focusing on anything in particular.

Take a moment to settle the body, making sure that you're as relaxed as you can be. You might find it helpful to take a moment to scan down through the body, from the top of the head down to the feet, noticing any areas of tension and gently encouraging them to relax and release.

When you are comfortable and relaxed, simply notice what's going on in your experience, right at this moment. Your body is sitting still; your mind is alert and aware, conscious of the posture of the body as it continues to sit. Sights, sounds, thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and more will come and go; simply allow this process to show itself to you.

The other practices in this book all use an 'anchor' of some kind, a particular object of focus - the breathing, sensations in different parts of the body, the feeling of loving kindness or compassion, the question 'Who am I?', or a candle flame. This practice is different - there's nothing in particular that we focus on. Rather, we allow the awareness to remain wide open, taking in anything and everything, allowing all things to come and go freely, and we simply observe what happens, without getting involved with it or trying to change it in any way. In a sense, the 'anchor' is the awareness itself.

Any time you notice that your mind has become caught up in something - for example, you find yourself in the middle of a train of thought, as opposed to merely noticing that a thought is present - simply acknowledge that the mind has become involved with what's going on, and gently let go. Actually, you don't really have to *do* anything here - at the point when you become aware that your mind was caught up in something, you've already begun to release it. Simply return to resting in awareness, fully present to whatever might arise.

Of all the practices in this book, this one has the least sense of 'doing something'. It's much more about *being* - resting in awareness, in the natural function of the mind. Notice that you don't need to *do* anything to see, hear or feel - these experiences happen all by themselves, no effort required. So we can trust the mind very deeply, and simply allow our experience to unfold, however that happens. There's no 'good' or 'bad' experience here, just experience. There's no need to resist or reject anything, no need to compare or analyse, no problem to solve, no question to be answered. In time we can learn to trust and let go into the vast space of awareness which can contain all things.

All sorts of things can come up in this practice: thoughts, memories, emotions, physical sensations, sights, sounds, and so on. The mind has a deeply rooted habit of grabbing onto whatever comes up and getting involved with it, so don't be surprised when this happens! It's all fine, and we deal with it all in the same way - simply noticing that the mind has become tangled up again, gently letting go and returning to resting in awareness. Some of the things that come up may feel very important, like they need to be remembered or dealt with immediately, but unless it's a true emergency we can let even these experiences go as well, and trust that anything of true value will still be with us at the end of the practice.

When you're ready to end the practice, bring some gentle movement back into the body - perhaps moving fingers and toes, twisting or stretching, whatever kind of movement feels good to you. In your own time, come out of your meditation posture, and then you're ready to go on with your day.

EXERCISE: THREE-MINUTE MEDITATION

We often have short pockets of time throughout the day when nothing much is happening. Waiting rooms, supermarket queues, a few minutes before a meeting when there isn't quite enough time to start something else.

Having a daily sitting meditation practice is a tremendous asset, but sometimes it can feel far removed from the hustle and bustle of daily life. Perhaps we can find glimpses of peace and contentment on the meditation cushion, but struggle to translate it to the office or the demands of our children.

It can be very helpful to experiment with developing a three-minute version of your meditation practice. This should not replace your longer daily sitting practice, but rather supplement it, providing a way to reconnect with that place of stillness and refuge throughout the day. If you can find opportunities to spend a couple of minutes here and there resting in open awareness (or whatever other practice you like to do), you can start to develop little oases of tranquillity throughout your day. This, in turn, can greatly reduce the amount of stress we feel throughout the day, leaving us calmer and more relaxed when we come to do our formal meditation practice.

One word of caution - if you're doing this in public, be conscious of your surroundings. I was once waiting for an eye test in a hospital and decided to meditate for a while. A nurse spotted me sitting unusually upright with my eyes closed and hurried over to ask if I was about to pass out...

7: SUSTAINING YOUR PRACTICE

HOW TO STRUCTURE YOUR PRACTICE TIME

Over the course of this book we've covered a range of different meditation techniques and approaches to practice. We've looked at mindfulness of breath and body, the cultivation of loving kindness and compassion, self-inquiry for insight, the development of mental stability and stillness, and resting in open awareness as a way of 'being, not doing'.

With so many options, how do we decide what to do with our practice time? What happens if we pick the wrong technique? Should we practise just one technique, or several? And how long for - how much is 'enough'?

As I said right at the start of the book, meditation is one of the most personal activities you will ever undertake. As a teacher I can offer suggestions for how to organise your time, but ultimately the real power in this process comes when you start to figure out for yourself what you find most valuable. There are really very few hard-and-fast rules about how to do this stuff - some meditation is better than no meditation, and that's about it!

With this in mind, we'll look at a few different ways to structure an on-going meditation practice, each of which has its advantages and disadvantages. See what feels right to you. If you're still not sure, pick the first one because it's the simplest!

I'll assume that by this point you've either tried out a selection of the practices in the previous chapters, you're planning to do so, or you have equivalent prior experience. If not, start by working your way through this book one chapter at a time, spending at least a week on each practice and making sure to do the additional exercises as well. You'll soon get a sense for which ones you find helpful and which ones leave you cold. Please do take your time - all meditation techniques take a while to get used to, and it might be that you need a few tries to get into the groove of a particular approach.

In these first few weeks you'll also get a sense for how meditation fits into your life. Are you a morning person or an evening person, or are you better off finding ten or fifteen minutes in the middle of the day? It's best to have a specific time each day to practise, so that it becomes part of your daily routine, like brushing your teeth. (And, like brushing your teeth, the world won't end if you miss a day from time to time, but you'll feel a bit icky if you do!)

How long should you practise? Well, how long do you have? Five minutes is infinitely better than nothing! Even short sessions like this produce noticeable benefits given enough time. Ten minutes is at least twice as good as five minutes, of course. If you have longer, could you try sitting for twenty minutes, or work up to half an hour?

It's best to start small and increase gradually, rather than trying to jump straight into two-hour daily sits and giving up immediately. Trying to force yourself to sit for twenty minutes every day when you've really only get ten minutes free most days is a recipe for disaster - you'll soon need to miss a day, then two days in a row, and before you know it a week has gone by without practising. These practices really do work, but only if you actually do them, so find a sustainable approach and just keep doing it, come rain or shine. That's all. If you can do that, you're on the right road!

So once you've figured out how to fit meditation into your day, and you've got a sense for which techniques appeal to you, how should you use the time you have? Here are some options.

- *Pick one technique that you like and do that every day.*

This is a great way to go - there's a saying in meditation circles that it's better to dig one deep hole than lots of shallow ones. If one of the approaches to meditation in this book speaks to you loud and clear, that's a great sign that you should take it and run with it, and see where the path leads. Go far enough and your life will be transformed for the better.

The only caveat is that the pure concentration practice in chapter 5 shouldn't be the only meditation you ever do. Working exclusively on concentration for long periods of time has a tendency to make you a bit spaced out. Sometimes people also use concentration practice as a hiding place to avoid having to deal with their problems, which I don't recommend. A balanced meditation practice should bring you more fully into the midst of your life rather than disconnecting you from it. Developing strong concentration is a wonderful asset, but it needs to be balanced with something else. So if concentration is your favourite type of meditation, I suggest using one of the other two options below and mixing up your concentration practice with at least one other style of meditation.

- *Pick a few techniques and cycle through them.*

If you've found several of the approaches in this book interesting and rewarding, there's no need to limit yourself to just one of them. Perhaps you could do self-inquiry on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and compassion on Tuesdays, Thursdays and the weekend. Or maybe spend a week on one, then a week on the other, and so on.

This is a nice way to keep your practice fresh and interesting if you find that focusing on one technique gets boring quickly. Don't jump around *too* much, however. The real power of meditation comes from consistently applying one or more techniques over an extended period to build skills and capacities within yourself, rather than simply entertaining yourself for ten minutes each day.

- *Use a specific sequence of techniques each time you sit.*

You can also incorporate multiple techniques into a single sitting. This works best if you have a bit longer to sit, maybe twenty minutes or more.

For example, suppose you have half an hour to sit, and would like to work with compassion, concentration and self-inquiry. You could start with five minutes of compassion, move into fifteen minutes of concentration, and finish with ten minutes of self-inquiry. (This is a nice order - heart-opening practices put you in a positive frame of mind for the rest of the session, which makes it easier to concentrate; concentration then settles the mind, allowing you to see what's going on more clearly; now you're in an ideal place to start your insight practice.)

It's important to be clear about what techniques you're going to use, for how long and in what order. Avoid the temptation to jump around from technique to technique whenever you get bored - that's just a more sophisticated form of distraction, the mind's way of wriggling out of having to settle down and meditate properly. So long as your time is structured deliberately and carefully, though, this is a great way to work with several meditation techniques in an on-going way.

All that being said, there are really no rules! Experiment, play, try things out and see what works for you. You won't know until you try...

MINDFULNESS IN DAILY LIFE

A question that often comes up when teaching mindfulness to beginners is 'Do I really need to meditate, or can I just be mindful all the time instead?' Sometimes the question is phrased a bit differently, like 'Can I meditate during my walk to work instead of sitting in the evening?', and sometimes it's phrased more as a statement, like 'I don't need to meditate because I already walk my dogs mindfully.'

So, how about it? Do you actually need to meditate, or is off-cushion mindfulness enough by itself?

Personally, I'm a big fan of starting with meditation and then gradually bringing mindfulness into daily life. That's how I teach, and that's the approach that seems to work best for most people - even the ones who are convinced they 'can't meditate'!

Practising mindfulness in daily life is extremely valuable, and is crucial for bringing the skills that you're developing on the cushion into those situations where they'll help the most. However, in the modern world with its oh-so-many distractions, so much to do and so many things on our minds, paying attention to the present moment without wandering off in thought doesn't come naturally to most people, and it's much more difficult to remain mindful while moving through your daily activities because there's so much going on. So, even if you find meditation difficult initially, you'll almost certainly find it much easier to use meditation to develop a solid foundation in mindfulness, in the same way that it's easier to learn a language if you start with some simple phrases and exercises rather than jumping straight into fluent conversation with a native speaker.

It's also interesting to note that beginners often report that they're noticing themselves becoming *more* distracted after a few weeks of meditation - that they're finding it *harder* to stay in the present moment rather than easier. Believe it or not, this is actually a good sign! A big part of the process of meditation is becoming more aware of what's going on in our minds, and part of that can be the surprising realisation that we spend much more of our time lost in distraction than we'd previously believed. So although it feels subjectively like the mind is wandering more, what's actually happening is that the mind has finally settled down enough that we can see what's really going on. Again, it's much easier to see this in meditation, where we deliberately set up supportive conditions for looking into the mind. Without the benefit of this perspective, it's easy to assume that you're being more mindful and less distracted than you really are.

If you want to make daily-life mindfulness the main focus of your practice, I'd suggest using a meditation technique like the body scan, breath counting or open awareness to give you the best possible training environment to start developing your mindfulness. In parallel, begin to introduce mindfulness into your daily life through the mindful activities described at the end of chapter 1. Start with one or two specific activities in your daily routine - for example, brushing your teeth, or washing the dishes - and try to do just those activities as mindfully as possible each day. When this has become a habit, and you routinely have a high degree of mindfulness in each of these activities, add a few more and work on those until you get them to the same standard, and so on. Trying to go straight to 'being mindful' all day long is usually a recipe for frustration.

Start small, build up, and keep going - over time you'll find mindfulness coming more often and more naturally, and the benefits becoming increasingly integrated into your daily life. Good luck!

SOURCES OF SUPPORT

It's immensely helpful to have other people to meditate with. A meditation partner keeps you accountable and motivates you to keep going. Knowing other meditators is also a great boon - despite the growing popularity of meditation and mindfulness, it's still common to find people who don't really get it, so it's good to have people you can talk to who are willing to listen! Many areas have local sitting groups where practitioners get together to meditate, talk about their practice and listen to talks from popular teachers. (It's worth noting that many of these groups have some kind of religious affiliation, often Buddhist, so bear that in mind if that's a concern for you.)

There are plenty of meditation teachers around these days, and you may well be able to find local classes. Again, these can potentially be a great support, but it's worth approaching with a 'try it and see' attitude rather than signing up for lifetime membership right away. Different teachers have very different ideas about the best way(s) to practise, and we're all pretty convinced that we're right and everyone else is wrong. In my opinion, a good teacher is one with whom you feel comfortable, who is teaching from personal experience, and who is happy to answer questions. If you get a bad vibe, run away. Sadly, not everyone in this world has their students' best interests at heart; five minutes with a search engine will turn up more scandals than you'll ever want to read about. It's important to say that these are a very small minority of teachers, but even so, do take care of yourself and never surrender your critical judgement.

If you can't find a group or teacher, you might find a meditation app such as HeadSpace or Insight Timer helpful. Apps make it very easy to jump around and do something new every day, so I suggest resisting this temptation as much as possible, to give the practices time to work. But they can also be a great motivation and a handy companion when you're on the move.

If you're interested in taking your practice further, there are many retreat centres around which offer day and weekend retreats, or longer if you have more time available. Retreats are clearly not suited to every domestic situation, lifestyle and temperament, but they're a great opportunity to go deep in a way that simply isn't possible in the midst of daily life.

Lastly, if you've taken the time to read this whole book, the least I can do is offer myself as a source of support. Please feel free to get in touch any time. My contact details are available on my website, <https://www.cheltenhamzen.co.uk/>. Thank you for reading, and good luck with your meditation practice!

AFTERWORD

As a child I was fascinated by martial arts, the more exotic the better. Japanese and Chinese martial arts have a long association with Zen meditation, and so very often I would find that the books I was reading would contain a short, cryptic chapter about meditation toward the end. I had no idea what any of it meant, but I soon formed the idea that meditation was extremely important, and I became determined to find out what it was all about - not just to read about it, but to see it for myself.

That determination has taken me all around the world, visiting temples and retreat centres, studying with masters in a range of traditions, and has given me a burgeoning library of books, most of which are just as cryptic as the ones that piqued my interest as a child. (Some, however, are written by teachers who have taken it upon themselves to demystify these great and profound traditions, explaining the many paths of meditation in the clearest way they possibly can. And while I continue to be inspired by the cryptic ones, I've learnt far more from the teachers who take pains to spell things out. This clarity is a guiding principle in my own teaching, and I hope I've achieved some measure of success in that regard in these pages.)

Over the years I've benefited profoundly from my own practice, and I firmly believe in the transformative power of this process. I became a teacher because I could see the positive effect that meditation was having in my own life, and at the same time I became more and more aware of how the people around me were continuing to suffer in ways that I'd been able to let go of. Sharing these astoundingly effective practices with others has become the central motivation of my life.

I continue to be humbled by, and deeply grateful for, the tremendously rich meditation traditions which have been passed down through generations all around the world, and it's in that spirit that I offer this book. I hope it's helped you in your own exploration of meditation, and that you've found something compelling enough within these pages that you'd like to see it for yourself, too.

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