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JEDI REALIST STUDIES**

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Meditation 101

An introduction to the theory and practice of meditation for the Jedi Realist

A course developed by the Jedi Academy, an affiliate training program of
The Institute for Jedi Realist Studies.
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Introduction

By Inari and Jax

Welcome to Meditation 101. This course is one of the first courses a new Jedi student takes upon beginning their study at the Jedi Academy. It is designed to provide you with a basic overview of the practice of meditation with a focus on calming your mind, providing you a tool for further growth along the Jedi path. Meditation 101 includes exercises for you to experience different forms of meditation along with articles that provide different perspectives on meditation along with guidance to improve your practice.

Since everyone comes into Jedi training with different backgrounds, there will be different levels of experience amongst the student body. Do not let that discourage you from sharing your experiences and asking questions. Even those experienced with meditation have bad days where meditation seems impossible. Yet even on the most impossible days, you cannot fail. Meditation is a process, not something you achieve. Nor is it a competition. It is a skill that needs practice to develop, and you will develop this skill if you follow this program.

This course is self paced, allowing you the freedom to move forward as you do well, and the time to practice on particularly difficult areas if necessary. We all move at our own pace, so patience and perseverance are necessary. Some will find meditation is very difficult, but as long as you persevere, ultimately you will reap the rewards that meditation can bring. However, I urge you to contact the instructor as soon as you are having trouble so you can get back on track quickly.

The World in which we live

We all live busy lives. Responsibilities like school, work, family and friends place constant demands upon our time and energy. Through all this, we persevere to achieve our goals, to become a Jedi, and to hear and feel the Force.

Unfortunately, the voice of the Force is very quiet, and cannot be heard over the never-ending clamor of our own thoughts; we cannot feel the Force in the deluge of physical sensations we routinely subject ourselves to. By learning to meditate, to quiet the mind and let go of the body, we gradually learn to sense and listen to the Force.

There are other benefits to regular meditation. It has been shown in clinical studies that the regular practice of meditation reduces the prime indicators of stress in the body, such as high blood pressure. It is also a prime method of learning about yourself, and as such is cheaper than therapy. However, the ultimate goal of meditation is not these, but to initiate an expansion and transformation of your spiritual self.

East and West -Views on Spirituality

Many of our meditative practices originate from the East. Generations of monks have taught and practiced their spiritual traditions for millennia. It is deeply ingrained in their society, where there is a sense of balance between the spiritual and the material. In India, it is acceptable for a man to devote the first half of his life to the duties of family in the capacity as householder, but to renounce these same duties and become the spiritual seeker in the second half of life.

In the West, there is a tendency to be a bit suspicious of spiritualism and dismiss people with an interest in it as being a bit nutty. Meditation has generally been practiced only within the framework of religious orders, if at all. Amongst other religious orders Eastern practices such as meditation are forbidden. This is gradually being overcome with the increasing interest in Eastern practices, and the plethora of books and visual media on the subject. Meditation is even being prescribed by some progressive doctors! Either way, it is becoming more accepted in western societies.

Prepare to be bored!

Meditation is essentially the practice of focused concentration. Using the idea of a target in the mind, the intention is to strike as near the centre as possible. This is, of course, much easier said than done, as anyone who has tried will know. Despite this, you must not be put off by early failure. The mind will resist this discipline; soon you will be face-to-face with your own mental clutter, boredom, resistance, and that darned song that just will NOT get out of your head. Though at first your spans of concentration will be brief, if you persevere in your practice the length of time you can maintain it will improve. As we begin, let's practice a little creative visualization to set the mood. Don't worry if you can't literally see the scene described; focus on how you feel reading the words below.

Joining the Company

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine that you are standing beside a broad pathway. You see people are walking along the path. Some walk in groups, others travel by themselves. You stand and watch them pass. As you observe you notice that these people radiate a serenity and contentment that you have only rarely seen.

Someone comes over to you and offers you a warm handshake.

'Are you coming?'

You reply and ask, 'What will I need to take with me?'

'Everything that you are.'

'Where are we going?' you ask.
'To discover all that you can be', comes the reply.
'When shall we start?' you ask.
'Right now.'

You step onto the path, as people greet you with warm smiles knowing that you have just joined them. Your journey has begun.

Getting Ready

There is a Chinese proverb 'The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step', so let us begin. Meditation touches upon the whole life and the whole person; so the first step of meditation is to take stock of the person we are today, of the life we live now, and of the whole situation in which we find ourselves. Doing so will give you a firm foundation on which to build your meditation practice.

Personal Reflection

What factors have led you towards meditation?

What hopes and expectations do you have?

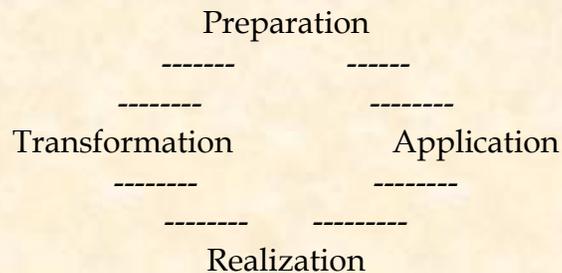
Do you practice meditation currently, or have in the past? If so, how successful have you been?

Share your experiences. Remember, there is no judgment here, only the desire to help you on your path.

Lesson 1 - The Cycle of Meditation

By Inari and Jax

The Cycle of Meditation enables us to look upon meditation as a continuous and dynamic process. It IS a process, not an isolated event. This lesson will give you an overview of this process, along with guidance to begin your practice.



Preparation

Posture

Meditation begins with sitting, not with relaxation. It is easy to confuse the two, but important not to do so. It is common for beginners to do some formal relaxation prior to meditation, but eventually you should be able to dispense with this and move straight into meditation.

The Lotus position is popular in the books and other media, and is the considered the position 'of choice'. In this position, the foot of the right leg is placed over the left thigh and the foot of the left leg is placed over the right thigh. (See figure 1a) If you can do this, then full kudos to you. Personally I find that the pain involved distracts too much from the meditation. Another, easier version is a Half Lotus position, with one foot on the opposite thigh while the opposite foot lies under the other thigh. (See figure 1b) There is even a Quarter Lotus, one foot goes under the opposite thigh, and the other foot lies on the opposite calf. There is another position called the Burmese position in which both legs are flat along the floor. This may be more comfortable for you as well. (See figure 1c) It is recommended that all positions are done on a cushion of some sort, as you can see in the figures.

Unfortunately, many Westerners just can't manage these positions. Remember, you need to be comfortable while meditating. Pain is just going to distract you and put you off from doing it again. It is not worth it. If you'd like to try something similar to these positions, you can simply sit cross legged; though this position requires a cushion to sit on to make sure the buttocks are above the knees, allowing freedom of movement while breathing.

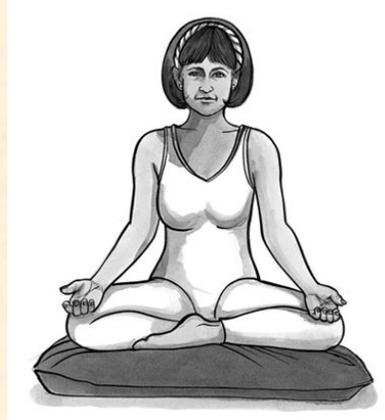
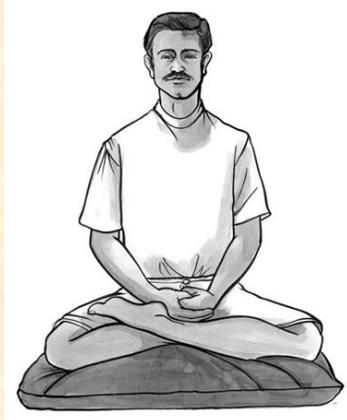
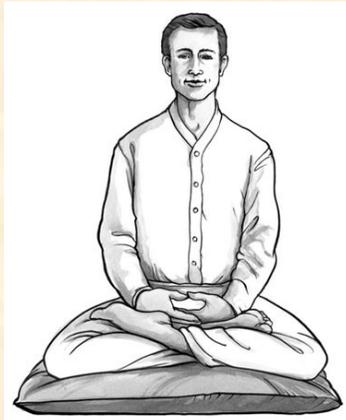


Figure 1a - Full Lotus Figure 1b - Half Lotus Figure 1c - Burmese

There are other alternatives. There is the Japanese kneeling posture, where you have your feet tucked under you, with the soles of your feet facing upwards. It is helpful to place a cushion under your buttocks (on your calves) when using this position. I don't recommend it for those who have had ankle injuries though; I have a bad ankle and cannot maintain this for too long. If you are not sure, give it a go. You can also purchase a stool for meditating in this position which takes the pressure off the feet and ankles, as shown in figure 2a. Whatever modification you choose for this position, remember to keep your spine straight!

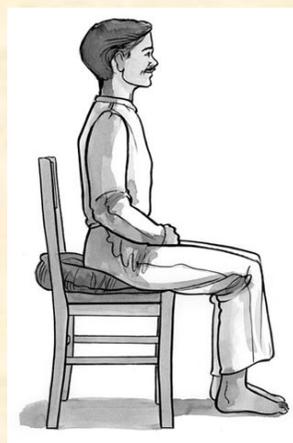


Figure 2a - Kneeling Figure 2b - Sitting

You can also sit on a chair or ottoman. You should be sitting straight-backed, on the edge of the chair, with your feet firmly on the floor (not crossed) and your hands folded in your lap. HOW you put your hands seems to be different according to the exercise and the practitioner's previous experience. I, personally, being familiar with Chinese systems, place my hands over my lower belly, in the Dan Tien area. Males place their right hand on top of their left, with the centre of the palms lining up (an acupuncture

point) and then gently place it about 3 fingers below the navel. Females should place their left hand on top of their right. There are many other methods, do what feels right.

It is important that your back is straight. Your hips should be tucked slightly forward to assist with this. Try moving cushions around until you are comfortable. If you are having trouble with this, imagine that there is a string attached to the crown of your head that runs down your spine. You are like a puppet dangling from this string - gravity itself will pull you upright.

If you find any upright posture hurts your back, you can also lie down, if you think you can resist going to sleep. Lie on a mat or a doubled blanket, on you back on the floor. DON'T lie in bed. Move your legs to approximately shoulder width apart and let your feet flop outwards, so your toes point away from your body. Your arms should be comfortably by your sides, palms up. Cover yourself with a blanket if you think you may get cold. Don't use a pillow under your head. If you are very uncomfortable use a rolled or folded towel under your head instead. If you find this hurts your back, place a pillow or rolled up blanket under your knees. This will relieve the pressure on your back. If you do find you fall asleep meditating, don't worry too much. If you need sleep, you need sleep. You'll probably find you have very calm sleep if you start in a meditative mindset. However, you also need to practice meditation and should either find a different position or a different time to meditate.

As an aside, there are many other postures that are themselves conducive to the meditative state, such as Hatha yoga asana and some Qigong stances. These won't be covered in this course. Just take note that when you are more advanced you may want to try out some other postures. Remember, if you are struggling with a meditation position, there are instructors available to help. No need to struggle with the preparation after all!

Breathing

Ah, it used to be so easy. You sucked in air when you needed it, and let it back out after, and you didn't have to worry about it. Well, now you will. The very nature of breathing makes it a great subject for the meditating mind, especially that of a beginner. It is automatic, yet you can also consciously participate in it. Awareness of the breath is a universal meditative technique, and is likely one that you have heard of or experienced already. Different meditative traditions have different ways of using this, for example, yogic practices tend towards intervention and control of the breath, Buddhist ones of active participation and awareness.

During meditation, breathing takes place through the nose, to permit a deep abdominal breath. Usually we think of breathing as being a two-step process, in and out. When practicing a conscious meditative breath cycle, however, it has four components: inhala-

tion, pause, exhalation, pause. The pauses should be a quiet, natural affair, not an enormous great gulp of air, followed by straining lungs and a violent exhalation, only to begin again!

When meditating, breathing is conscious, and this awareness underpins all meditations. Even when your awareness is focused on the breath, random thoughts will still arise. This will be addressed in more detail in the coming lessons, but for now try to allow the thoughts to pass through without judgment or concern. Just remain calm, continue with your exercise, and don't berate yourself - that just involves more thinking. It is OK to have thoughts pop in. It's so common in fact that it has a fun name - the monkey mind. Everyone has it; meditation just shows how pervasive it can be. Just like anyone else who wants your attention, if you don't pay attention to them, they will eventually go.

Our focus initially will be primarily on breathing, as you will see in the exercises below. Without quality breathing, your meditation will be ineffective and probably a waste of your time. Giving it the attention it deserves early will provide a solid foundation for all future practice.

Some additional tips

Relax! Easier said than done, right? Well, that is one of the great benefits of meditation. First, drop your shoulders. If you are tense, your shoulders tend to be raised. Relax them; consciously drop them as far down and as loosely as you can. You might find that rotating them helps. Randomly throughout your exercises and throughout the day, take note of your shoulders. Are they raised? If so, drop them. You'll feel instant relief.

What do you do with your eyes? Well, that depends on you and what meditation you are doing, and whether or not you are sleepy. There are three options. The first is to close your eyes. The problem with this is that it is easier to go to sleep this way, which is not good. The Japanese tend to close their eyes. Buddhist traditions have their eyes at 'half mast', i.e. half open, with a soft focus. This prevents you from sleeping, but can be uncomfortable if you tend to have dry eyes. The final option is, you guessed it, fully open. This is best for when you are contemplating something, like a candle or a picture. Keep your eyes on a soft focus or you might get a headache. I suggest you try out all three and see which you prefer.

Almost forgot! WHEN do I practice!?

It is preferable to meditate first thing in the morning. Your mind and body are rested, there's a good vibe in the new day, and if you are lucky the rest of your family may be still asleep and will leave you alone. The bad part is you're going to have to get up earlier. Yep, you're going to have to crawl out of your lovely, warm bed to do your practice, preferably at the same time each day (even on the weekends), and if you don't do it every day you will progress more slowly, if at all. Some people find it useful to get up at 5:30 to get in meditation and stretches before the demands of life begin to impinge.

Yes, you may miss your bed some days, but the peace and calm generated by meditation assist greatly throughout a busy day.

The other option is in the evening. You are more likely to be disturbed at night, and your body is tired and may rebel, your mind is tired and will babble back all the things that happened to you that day. If you really can't do it in the morning though, find a time when you will be undisturbed and do your sitting then.

One last thing. In the morning, it is best to begin your day with meditation, then energy work if you do it, then physical activity. This warms your mind and body in the proper manner. Reverse this sequence in the evening. However you choose to practice, listen to your body. If you start in the mornings and it doesn't seem to work well, try the afternoons or evenings. Work with your body at this stage, not against it. As you develop more skills in meditation you can work on meditating at times that aren't as natural for you.

Application

Concentration

The vehicle used to keep one focused doing meditation is the 'subject'. This may be our breath, a symbol such as a mandala, a phrase (mantra), or a visualization process. The intention is to return to the subject over and over, and even if our mind wanders, we return to the subject. The process of learning focused concentration requires patience and perseverance, and cultivates the development of mental awareness and self-control required of a Jedi.

We will explore this topic further in other lessons.

Realization

Every time you meditate, it is like planting a seed in your mind. It will bear fruit, but in its own time. This may take many forms; there may be a change in your understanding, your personality, or your attitudes in general. It may be a feeling, or a knowing. Awareness is the key to this. As you meditate, take note of any realizations you have, no matter how small. You might be surprised to see these realizations expand in number and depth. It also reinforces the importance of realizations to your mind, encouraging the process to develop further.

Transformation

This part is difficult to see yourself, because it is so slow, often others will see it first. Meditation works at a deep and potent level, and you will experience a gradual transformation of yourself. How you change can only be seen as it happens, I cannot predict this for you.

Enough preparation, let's take these guidelines, and apply them to exercise 1 and 2. If you are having problems or have any questions, please ask the instructors for guidance and they will do their best to help.

Exercise 1 - Breathing

Breathing is a strange thing in that we do it all the time without thinking about it, yet we still need to be taught to do it. That's going to be the focus of this week. Before we go any farther, I'd like you to take a moment to notice your breath. Don't change anything, just notice it. If you are like a majority of people, your breath is probably shallow. Your shoulders probably move up and down when you breathe, as your chest rises and falls. This is a rather inefficient breath. It keeps us alive, but does not supply us with much vitality or energy.

Our emotions are tied to our breathing. When we are scared, we tend to hold our breath, perhaps forgetting to breathe all together. When angry, we tend to breathe in more than we breathe out. To counter act these emotions, we have a few tools. The most immediate is our breath. Deepening and balancing our breath (equal time breathing in and out) helps to balance our emotions. Try to remember this connection the next time you feel emotional and try to focus on your breathing. Observe for yourself whether it helps or not.

The first thing we need to change about our breathing is how we breathe. Adults tend to breathe from our chest and shoulders, which is a shallow breath. Yet if you watch a baby, you'll notice they breathe from their stomach, which is a naturally deeper breath. This is often called abdominal breathing, and this will be the focus this week. We'll begin using an exercise that was found at http://www.authentic-breathing.com/belly_breathing.htm

Practice

1. Lie down comfortably on your back on your bed or on a mat or carpeted floor. Position yourself with your feet flat on the floor and your knees bent (pointing upward). Simply follow your breathing for a minute or two with your attention. See if you can sense which parts of your body your breath touches.

2. Continue to follow your breathing as you rub your hands together until they are very warm.
3. Put your hands (one on top of the other) on your belly, with the center of your lower hand touching your navel. Watch how your breathing responds.
4. You may notice that your belly wants to expand as you inhale and retract as you exhale. Let this happen, but don't try to force it.
5. If your belly seems tight, rub your hands together again until they are warm and then massage your belly, especially right around the outside edge of your belly button. Notice how your belly begins to soften and relax.
6. Now rub your hands together again until they are warm and put them on your belly again. Watch how this influences your breath. Do not try to do anything. Simply watch and enjoy as your belly begins to come to life, expanding as you inhale and retracting as you exhale.
7. If your belly still seems overly tight and does not want to move as you breathe, press down with your hands on your belly as you exhale. Then as you inhale, gradually release the tension. Try this several times. Notice how your belly begins to open more on inhalation.
8. When you are ready to stop, be sure to sense your entire abdominal area, noting any special sensations of warmth, comfort, and energy. Spend a few minutes allowing these sensations to spread into all the cells of your belly all the way back to your spine.

Once you become comfortable with breathing in your back, sit or stand up. How do you breathe now? How does this compare to before you learned the abdominal breath? Document these results in your training journal and in the discussion forum if you are taking this as part of an official Academy term. Remember, there are no failures here, and even those with immediate success may find themselves stressed out later and find breathing a struggle. What matters is being honest so we can all learn from each other. If you aren't comfortable with this, please contact the instructor so it can be addressed.

Do this exercise as many times as is necessary to breathe in this manner while in your preferred meditation position. Return to it anytime you are struggle with your breathing. Stress and other health issues can cause us to lose the ability to breathe properly and this exercise will reconnect you with that ability.

Exercise 2 – 5 Minute Meditation

This week is quite simple, in theory. Find a comfortable position, either sitting or lying down if back pain is an issue. Just make sure you have good posture, as discussed in this week's lecture. You can keep your eyes open or closed, whichever your preference. You are then going to breathe using the abdominal breath you learned in exercise 1.

And that's it. Try this for 5 minutes, and see what happens. You might find it difficult to maintain your posture, to remember to breathe with your stomach, or to not think about the distractions of your day. This exercise is partly to give you a little perspective on why we learn different techniques for meditation. It's far more difficult to just sit without thinking about anything that we realize. It also gives you some perspective on how fast your brain kicks in. You might want to try this every so often throughout the course to see how you're progressing.

Do this for just a few minutes each day. Experiment with timing. Is it easier for you in the morning after you wake up, or at night before you go to sleep? Is it easier with your eyes opened or closed? Think of this as an experiment before you begin learning techniques. Summarize your thoughts each day in your training journal. Be sure to include when you meditated, in what position, whether your eyes were opened or closed, and anything you noticed as you practiced. This will make it easier for you to track your growth and remember what does or doesn't work.

Do this exercise at least three times before moving on to the next lesson, though you are welcome to practice it more often if you wish. You are also welcome to practice for longer than 5 minutes if you wish. Just remember to relax and enjoy the process.

Lesson 2 – Mindfulness Meditation

By Jax

In this lesson you're going to learn mindfulness meditation. To prepare for that, I'd like you to read about removing unwanted thoughts that pop up while we meditate. Hopefully it will make it easier for you to then proceed with mindfulness meditation.

Releasing Unwanted Thoughts in Meditation

When I first started on the Jedi path, one of my main concerns was how to meditate and clear my head. That's one of the things you always hear about with meditation. "Just sit there and clear your head." Well, I'm sure everyone has learned how difficult that can be. If we could just sit and clear our head, we wouldn't need much meditative practice, now would we?

It wasn't until 3 years into my path that I finally received the insight required to gain control of my mind. The Buddhists at my university offer classes where they bring up the local master from Houston who addresses the basics of Buddhism, including meditation. I only went to the first class, but it gave me all the insight I needed at that point in my life. I'll do my best to pass that insight onto you so you may benefit as I did.

If you're anything like me, sitting in meditation involved a slew of random thoughts, along with one song that was stuck in there from who knows when! I would sit and try to let them go, tell them to leave, all sorts of things, but it never worked. Apparently I was going about it all wrong! By focusing on the thoughts, I kept them with me, no matter what I did. I put energy towards them, and anything we put energy towards we keep to us. So while I wanted to release them, what I was experiencing was these extra-neous thoughts distracting me. My focus of distraction created the experience of distraction. However, what I wish to experience is focus, so that is what I need to put energy towards. The monk described it in this manner.

Say you're holding a coffee cup in your hand. There's nothing inherently wrong with holding a coffee cup, but you would rather hold the beautiful rock on the table. Now pretend that you don't know how to put down something. I know it can be a bit of a stretch, but just pretend. After all, this is only an analogy.

Since you don't know how to put down the cup, you try all sorts of things, but no matter what the cup stays in your hand. This is what I had tried for years, and many others I'm sure. But what if we did something else?

We already know how to pick things up, as evident by the cup in our hand. So instead of focusing on what we don't want, the cup, let's focus on what we do want, the rock. Focusing on the rock, we reach down and pick it up. Now you're holding a rock in your hand. In order to do that, you had to release the cup in some way. It doesn't even matter how, just that you did. This is how we release our thoughts.

When we meditate, there is something to focus on, usually breathing or counting. When we notice an extraneous thought, don't focus on the thought. Instead, return our focus to the counting or breathing. Keep focusing, and before you know it the thought will have left your focus without you actively removing it! For me this was a breakthrough, because though I had many, many random thoughts, I could return my focus to breathing and find that quiet center again. Yes, you will probably have to do this constantly when you are learning to meditate, but in time you will see results in how long you go without extra thoughts.

This idea can be applied elsewhere in your life also. Do you have a song in your head that you absolutely hate? Find a song that you love and sing that in your head until it overwhelms the original song. Is there something bothering you? Think of something else. Focus on something that is more useful to you. The applications to your life are limitless and can help you gain control over the ever wandering mind.

Practice

In the next few days, take note of the times when your mind is not under your control. Is there a song stuck in your head? Are you focusing on something that is upsetting you? Use this technique to shift your focus. Keep track of these experiences in your training journal and share them in the discussion forums. If you're finding this difficult, please contact an instructor.

The following article discusses mindfulness meditation. You'll find some of this information is a repeat of the previous lesson. However, this information is presented in a different way, and therefore may help you understand what you didn't understand before.

How to do Mindfulness Meditation

By Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche

"Mindfulness practice is simple and completely feasible. Just by sitting and doing nothing, we are doing a tremendous amount."

In my last column I discussed why mindfulness is essential to spiritual practice, for no matter what spiritual tradition we follow, we must have a mind that is able to stay in the present moment if our understanding and experience is to deepen. Now I would like to talk about some aspects of the actual mindfulness practice.

In mindfulness, or shamatha, meditation, we are trying to achieve a mind that is stable and calm. What we begin to discover is that this calmness or harmony is a natural aspect of the mind. Through mindfulness practice we are just developing and strengthening it, and eventually we are able to remain peacefully in our mind without struggling. Our mind naturally feels content.

An important point is that when we are in a mindful state, there is still intelligence. It's not as if we blank out. Sometimes people think that a person who is in deep meditation doesn't know what's going on – that it's like being asleep. In fact, there are meditative states where you deny sense perceptions their function, but this is not the accomplishment of shamatha practice.

Creating a Favorable Environment

There are certain conditions that are helpful for the practice of mindfulness. When we create the right environment it's easier to practice.

It is good if the place where you meditate, even if it's only a small space in your apartment, has a feeling of upliftedness and sacredness. It is also said that you should meditate in a place that is not too noisy or disturbing, and you should not be in a situation where your mind is going to be easily provoked into anger or jealousy or other emotions. If you are disturbed or irritated, then your practice is going to be affected.

Beginning the Practice

I encourage people to meditate frequently but for short periods of time – ten, fifteen, or twenty minutes. If you force it too much the practice can take on too much of a personality, and training the mind should be very, very simple. So you could meditate for ten

minutes in the morning and ten minutes in the evening, and during that time you are really working with the mind. Then you just stop, get up, and go.

Often we just plop ourselves down to meditate and just let the mind take us wherever it may. We have to create a personal sense of discipline. When we sit down, we can remind ourselves: "I'm here to work on my mind. I'm here to train my mind." It's okay to say that to yourself when you sit down, literally. We need that kind of inspiration as we begin to practice.

Posture

The Buddhist approach is that the mind and body are connected. The energy flows better when the body is erect, and when it's bent, the flow is changed and that directly affects your thought process. So there is a yoga of how to work with this. We're not sitting up straight because we're trying to be good schoolchildren; our posture actually affects the mind.

People who need to use a chair for meditation should sit upright with their feet touching the ground. Those using a meditation cushion such as a zafu or gomden should find a comfortable position with legs crossed and hands resting palm-down on your thighs. The hips are neither rotated forward too much, which creates tension, nor tilted back so you start slouching. You should have a feeling of stability and strength.

When we sit down the first thing we need to do is to really inhabit our body – really have a sense of our body. Often we sort of prop ourselves up and pretend we're practicing, but we can't even feel our body; we can't even feel where it is. Instead, we need to be right here. So when you begin a meditation session, you can spend some initial time settling into your posture. You can feel that your spine is being pulled up from the top of your head so your posture is elongated, and then settle.

The basic principle is to keep an upright, erect posture. You are in a solid situation: your shoulders are level, your hips are level, your spine is stacked up. You can visualize putting your bones in the right order and letting your flesh hang off that structure. We use this posture in order to remain relaxed and awake. The practice we're doing is very precise: you should be very much awake even though you are calm. If you find yourself getting dull or hazy or falling asleep, you should check your posture.

Gaze

For strict mindfulness practice, the gaze should be downward focusing a couple of inches in front of your nose. The eyes are open but not staring; your gaze is soft. We are trying to reduce sensory input as much as we can. People say, "Shouldn't we have a sense of the environment?" but that's not our concern in this practice. We're just trying

to work with the mind and the more we raise our gaze, the more distracted we're going to be. It's as if you had an overhead light shining over the whole room, and all of a sudden you focus it down right in front of you. You are purposefully ignoring what is going on around you. You are putting the horse of mind in a smaller corral.

Breath

When we do shamatha practice, we become more and more familiar with our mind, and in particular we learn to recognize the movement of the mind, which we experience as thoughts. We do this by using an object of meditation to provide a contrast or counterpoint to what's happening in our mind. As soon as we go off and start thinking about something, awareness of the object of meditation will bring us back. We could put a rock in front of us and use it to focus our mind, but using the breath as the object of meditation is particularly helpful because it relaxes us.

As you start the practice, you have a sense of your body and a sense of where you are, and then you begin to notice the breathing. The whole feeling of the breath is very important. The breath should not be forced, obviously; you are breathing naturally. The breath is going in and out, in and out. With each breath you become relaxed.

Thoughts

No matter what kind of thought comes up, you should say to yourself, "That may be a really important issue in my life, but right now is not the time to think about it. Now I'm practicing meditation." It gets down to how honest we are, how true we can be to ourselves, during each session.

Everyone gets lost in thought sometimes. You might think, "I can't believe I got so absorbed in something like that," but try not to make it too personal. Just try to be as unbiased as possible. Mind will be wild and we have to recognize that. We can't push ourselves. If we're trying to be completely concept-free, with no discursiveness at all, it's just not going to happen.

So through the labeling process, we simply see our discursiveness. We notice that we have been lost in thought, we mentally label it "thinking" – gently and without judgment – and we come back to the breath. When we have a thought – no matter how wild or bizarre it may be – we just let it go and come back to the breath, come back to the situation here.

Each meditation session is a journey of discovery to understand the basic truth of who we are. In the beginning the most important lesson of meditation is seeing the speed of the mind. But the meditation tradition says that mind doesn't have to be this way: it just hasn't been worked with.

What we are talking about is very practical. Mindfulness practice is simple and completely feasible. And because we are working with the mind that experiences life directly, just by sitting and doing nothing, we are doing a tremendous amount.

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche is holder of the Buddhist and Shambhala lineages of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. He has received teachings from many of the great Buddhist masters of this century, including Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Penor Rinpoche and his father Trungpa Rinpoche. In 1995 he was recognized as the incarnation of the great nineteenth-century Buddhist teacher Mipham Rinpoche.

Exercise 3 – Mindfulness Meditation

Perform this meditation for at least 10 minutes a day every day if possible. After the meditation, take note of how things went in your training journal. What did you struggle with? What improved? Were you able to apply the lesson of removing unwanted thoughts?

When you have completed this exercise for at least a week, submit your training journal to the instructor to check on your progress.

Lesson 3 – Meditation for Self Discovery

By Inari

A Mind above our Mind

If you have been practicing meditation for a while, or at least have been practicing the first two lessons, you have probably experienced your mind starting to get bored with the whole 'focused concentration' thing. So like a small child, it begins to act up. It will throw thoughts at you to distract you, or perhaps give you a niggling itch. Hopefully, you've been ignoring your mind and forcing it to return to the subject at hand, either through your own methods or the technique presented last week. After you have been doing this for a while, you will find that though the thoughts will pop up, you are able to ignore them, it is as if you are just a passive witness to them. Your awareness is becoming separated from your 'self'. This is the beginning of detachment, which is one of the great benefits of the practice of meditation. Duly cultivated, it will allow you to examine yourself without becoming emotionally involved in your thoughts and feelings.

This might sound a bit scary, but it is necessary if you wish to be a Jedi. To develop the calmness and wisdom that are part of the personality traits developed by Jedi, you need to understand yourself, what triggers your emotional reactions, and determine how to stop reacting to the trigger. Even for those who wish to follow a path that uses emotions as a tool, you need to clarify and understand your emotions if you are to use them as a source of power. Confusion is not empowering.

I will admit, this is much easier said than done.

'Be mindful of your thoughts'

I had to get a Star Wars quote in somewhere! This one is very apt. Stand outside of your thoughts and examine them. Reflect upon them. Are you truly these thoughts that flutter through your mind? It is said that our thoughts and perceptions create our reality. If you tend to dwell on the negative, put yourself down or indulge in self-delusion, you are creating a reality of sadness and depression for yourself. You don't have to live like that. With meditation, you are gaining a powerful tool for self discovery.

Enter meditation, and when you are calm watch your thoughts. Are they sad, negative? Always standing aside from your thoughts, reflect on what is causing them. This is something you must discover for yourself.

Living Meditation

Energy circulates through the body during meditation. This energy should not be restricted to only within the body, it should be allowed to flow outwardly into your life. This is how meditation changes us. We need to live meditatively. Meditation is practice, in a simplified mental environment, for a way of living.

Two major components of this way of living are the consciousness of the Oneness (as Jedi we say a connection to the Force) and detached concern, of 'being in the world, but not of it'. Sensing the Force and feeling your connection to all other life increases your empathy for others; it is a basis for cooperation and altruistic behavior. However, when we become one with all life, there can arise a fear of needing to protect everything in the same way we wish to protect ourselves. It can feel like a burden. Accepting responsibility for others, as if they are a part of us, yet not feeling the need to rescue them, is the attitude of detached concern. I have seen people who have learned to open themselves to others, but have not developed the detachment burn out quickly, especially when giving healing treatments. Meditation has an inbuilt safety valve for you, it will help you develop this detached concern, and it is not only for others, but is a valuable tool in understanding yourself.

The two "I"s

Practicing meditation will assist you in creating a new reality for yourself, one in which you are empowered by your connection to the Force. No matter which meditative tradition you use, they will all allow you to feel the Oneness, whether you name it God, or the Tao, or the Force. All meditative traditions have basically the same two methods for doing this.

Intent

If you intend to meditate and have a blank mind, eventually this is exactly what you will get. If you wish to travel to other spiritual realms, then this is what will happen. What happens during a meditation session is not totally determined by the technique you use, but by your intention and expectation. You must have a goal of connecting to the Force and a connection to all things, and the expectation that you will succeed in doing so. Intent is very, very important (in this and other facets of your training).

Imagination

This does not mean the part of your brain that 'makes stuff up' but the core of your creative and pattern matching abilities. Imagery enters meditation either implicitly, because of the meditators background, assumptions, or expectations; or explicitly, because of specific imagery techniques used in the meditation. Meditation is a psychic process in

which your spiritual energy affects the functioning of the body. Your imagination shapes how that energy will affect the body and the result that is achieved.

Imagery can be a powerful tool, and is used in many meditative techniques, such as chakra meditation. This technique can be unsuitable for beginners, as you are opening yourself up to forces that you may not be prepared to handle. A better option for beginners is an affirmation, which is like a mantra. It is a phrase or prayer based upon the ideal the person wants to govern the meditation. It can be a single word, such as 'love', or a prayer. You should repeat the affirmation until it is well established in your mind, and then simply hold the feeling of the affirmation in your mind as the focus, allowing the vibration of the feeling to resonate through your body.

Exercise 4 - Mantras

This exercise was sourced from the book 'Awakening Your Psychic Powers' by Henry Reed, which is based upon the practices and teachings of Edgar Cayce.

The following is a 'generic' exercise that was designed by scientist Patricia Carrington of Princeton University as a 'standard' for experimentation. It incorporates the focus on the breath, as well as the repetitive mental focus (a word) or mantra, and is well suited to beginners. However, this can be a bit tricky for some people, so I am very interested in hearing about your results.

I would like you to pick one of the following words, the one that has the most 'feeling' for you and only use this one for the duration of your practice. If you find these don't resonate with you, choose something else.

- 'One' - as in the Oneness.
- 'Force' - feel the Force
- 'Jedi' - feel your attraction to this way of life.

Close your eyes and let yourself relax. Notice that every time your body exhales, it relaxes. Allow your attention to rest its focus on the in and out of the breath. Every time the breath goes out, it is relaxing. Every time the breath comes in, let it be with the thought 'One' (or 'Force' or 'Jedi'). Let yourself think the word, but simply let your mind think 'One' with every incoming breath, like an automatic thought. Your mind will wander. That is natural. Whenever you discover that your mind has wandered, gently return your focus to your breathing, thinking the word 'One' with every breath.

As usual, try to do this once per day, but a minimum of 3 times this week. Summarize your experiences in your training journal. Please also share your experiences in the discussion area. As always, if you're not sure of what you're doing or if it just isn't working, contact the instructor.

Lecture 4 - Expanding Our Awareness

By Inari and Jax

In meditation, we turn our attention inward and focus our concentration upon a single, inner practice. The whole point of meditation, however, is not the 10, 20, 60 minutes or more we might spend actually meditating. No, it is to live meditatively, to bring that focused awareness into every facet of our everyday life. We have probably seen in the fictional movies how Jedi are retain an awareness of all that goes on about them, no matter what they are doing, and have admired it. We may not be able to develop our senses to quite the degree of the fictional Jedi, but we CAN come quite close, by living mindfully.

Practice becomes life, and life becomes practice. Awareness may be thought of as whatever you notice on a moment to moment basis. Living without awareness is to sleep-walk through life. I'm sure most of us have experienced the strange sensation of arriving at a destination in a car with no memory of the trip there! Living in awareness is to be awake to life. It is quite different from relying on book learning, acquired knowledge, plausible explanations or any other intellectual construction! Direct awareness is just about looking and seeing without embellishment.

Look around you, right now. What do you see? You'll see what is in your immediate surroundings. These are most likely unsurprising to you, as you've seen them many times before. Since they are familiar you have names and concepts for these items. Yet is this tendency to take our surroundings and place them into pre-existing concepts that prevents us from seeing truly. Direct awareness is just looking, and just seeing without the interference of names, labels, concepts etc. This opens the mind to every moment and to every experience in the day. To quote from the movies 'Truly wonderful is the mind of a child'; this is how children see the world. You need to unlearn what you have learned and return (at least in this respect) to the childlike wonders you once experienced.

The contemporary teacher Osho gives this simple advice:

Quote: 'You look at a flower - you simply look. Don't say 'beautiful' or 'ugly'. Don't say anything. Don't bring in words, don't verbalize. Simply look. In the beginning it will be difficult but start with things with which you are not too involved; look at things which are neutral - a rock, a flower, a tree, the sun rising, a bird in flight, a cloud moving in the sky. Start from neutral things and only then move towards emotionally loaded situations.'

You will receive many benefits from bringing your practice into your daily awareness. You will be more open to the Force, and more sensitive to others. It also assists with creating detachment and I find that it is good for creativity too, because when you simply 'see' something as it is and not within the context of your preconceived notions, you are then free to see it in an entirely different way, which otherwise you would not have.

Exercise 5 - Awareness

This exercise has the simplest directions, and you've already done it once in the lecture. Pick a place to sit and just be aware of what is going on around you. Work on being objective about what you see - don't interpret, try to understand, or judge - simply observe. I would like you to try to do this in three different locations this week, if possible. First, do this in your own home. There probably won't be too many things moving around. However, you may have to quell thoughts that involve your cleaning habits! Next, try to find one place that is in nature - a park, forest, stream, etc. Here there will probably be more things moving around, but not to the point of being overwhelmed. Then, finally, try to find a place with people. Perhaps this is at school or work. Here you may find it particularly challenging to be objective. That's ok, this is a learning experience.

After each exercise, write a summary of what happened in your training journal. What did you feel? What was difficult? What did you learn when you could be objective? After you have completed these exercises, submit your training journal to the instructor for feedback.

Lesson 5 – Buddhist Meditation

This week we're going to learn a Buddhist meditation. To help you understand the philosophy of meditation from the Buddhist perspective, this week's reading comes from Buddha-net (<http://www.buddhanet.net/>), an excellent resource for all things Buddhist. Some of the aspects of the reading you've seen before, but the new elements will hopefully further your understanding.

Advice on Meditation

by Sagyal Rinpoche

When you read books about meditation, or often when meditation is presented by different groups, much of the emphasis falls on the techniques. In the West, people tend to be very interested in the "technology" of meditation. However, by far the most important feature of meditation is not technique, but the way of being, the spirit, which is called the "posture", a posture which is not so much physical, but more to do with spirit or attitude.

It is well to recognize that when you start on a meditation practice, you are entering a totally different dimension of reality. Normally in life we put a great deal of effort into achieving things, and there is a lot of struggle involved, whereas meditation is just the opposite, it is a break from how we normally operate.

Meditation is simply a question of being, of melting, like a piece of butter left in the sun. It has nothing to do with whether or not you "know" anything about it, in fact, each time you practice meditation it should be fresh, as if it were happening for the very first time. You just quietly sit, your body still, your speech silent, your mind at ease, and allow thoughts to come and go, without letting them play havoc on you. If you need something to do, then watch the breathing. This is a very simple process. When you are breathing out, know that you are breathing out. When you breathe in, know that you are breathing in, without supplying any kind of extra commentary or internalized mental gossip, but just identifying with the breath. That very simple process of mindfulness processes your thoughts and emotions, and then, like an old skin being shed, something is peeled off and freed.

Usually people tend to relax the body by concentrating on different parts. Real relaxation comes when you relax from within, for then everything else will ease itself out quite naturally.

When you begin to practice, you center yourself, in touch with your "soft spot", and just remain there. You need not focus on anything in particular to begin with. Just be spa-

cious, and allow thoughts and emotions to settle. If you do so, then later, when you use a method such as watching the breath, your attention will more easily be on your breathing. There is no particular point on the breath on which you need to focus, it is simply the process of breathing. Twenty-five percent of your attention is on the breath, and seventy-five percent is relaxed. Try to actually identify with the breathing, rather than just watching it. You may choose an object, like a flower, for example, to focus upon. Sometimes you are taught to visualize a light on the forehead, or in the heart. Sometimes a sound or a mantra can be used. But at the beginning it is best to simply be spacious, like the sky. Think of yourself as the sky, holding the whole universe.

When you sit, let things settle and allow all your discordant self with its unguineness and unnaturalness to dissolve, out of that rises your real being. You experience an aspect of yourself which is more genuine and more authentic-the "real" you. As you go deeper, you begin to discover and connect with your fundamental goodness.

The whole point of meditation is to get used to that aspect which you have forgotten. In Tibetan "meditation" means "getting used to". Getting used to what? To your true nature, your Buddha nature. This is why, in the highest teaching of Buddhism, Dzogchen, you are told to "rest in the nature of mind". You just quietly sit and let all thoughts and concepts dissolve. It is like when the clouds dissolve or the mist evaporates, to reveal the clear sky and the sun shining down. When everything dissolves like this, you begin to experience your true nature, to "live". Then you know it, and at that moment, you feel really good. It is unlike any other feeling of well being that you might have experienced. This is a real and genuine goodness, in which you feel a deep sense of peace, contentment and confidence about yourself.

It is good to meditate when you feel inspired. Early mornings can bring that inspiration, as the best moments of the mind are early in the day, when the mind is calmer and fresher (the time traditionally recommended is before dawn). It is more appropriate to sit when you are inspired, for not only is it easier then as you are in a better frame of mind for meditation, but you will also be more encouraged by the very practice that you do. This in turn will bring more confidence in the practice, and later on you will be able to practice when you are not inspired. There is no need to meditate for a long time: just remain quietly until you are a little open and able to connect with your heart essence. That is the main point.

After that, some integration, or meditation in action. Once your mindfulness has been awakened by your meditation, your mind is calm and your perception a little more coherent. Then, whatever you do, you are present, right there. As in the famous Zen master's saying: "When I eat, I eat; when I sleep, I sleep". Whatever you do, you are fully present in the act. Even washing dishes, if it is done one-pointedly, can be very energizing, freeing, cleansing. You are more peaceful, so you are more "you". You assume the "Universal You".

One of the fundamental points of the spiritual journey is to persevere along the path. Though one's meditation may be good one day and not so good the next, like changes in scenery, essentially it is not the experiences, good or bad which count so much, but rather that when you persevere, the real practice rubs off on you and comes through both good and bad. Good and bad are simply apparitions, just as there may be good or bad weather, yet the sky is always unchanging. If you persevere and have that sky like attitude of spaciousness, without being perturbed by emotions and experiences, you will develop stability and the real profoundness of meditation will take effect. You will find that gradually and almost unnoticed, your attitude begins to change. You do not hold on to things as solidly as before, or grasp at them so strongly, and though crisis will still happen, you can handle them a bit better with more humor and ease. You will even be able to laugh at difficulties a little, since there is more space between you and them, and you are freer of yourself. Things become less solid, slightly ridiculous, and you become more lighthearted.

Personal Reflection

For your discussion this week I'm particularly interested in what new understanding you came to from this writing. Did this writing help? Have you found yourself forgetting some of these points as you progressed through the meditations? Note this in your training journal and in the discussion forum if you like.

Chan Meditation

By Jax

This meditation is a bit different in that there is a specific sitting position, in addition to a hand position that I will describe here. You don't have to do it, but since it was taught to me there must be a reason for it, right? First, hold your hands out in front of you, fingers pointing up, palms out, left thumb crossed over your right thumb. Now fold your right thumb down, so it lies next to your left. Next, wrap your right fingers around both of your thumbs. Make sure you have both of the thumbs in your fingers. Then, just let the left fingers curl around your right hand. You don't have to hold everything real tight, just relax. Let the hands rest in your lap. If you find yourself getting sleepy or losing focus during the meditation you can hold the fingers tighter. An example can be seen in figure 3 below.



Figure 3 – Chan Meditation hand posture

Alright, on to the actual meditation. This should be done sitting, in whatever position you can perform comfortably. The important thing is to have good relaxed posture. Also, it helps immensely to sit on a small cushion if you are sitting on the floor to raise your hips above your knees. Also, place a towel across your knees and legs. This keeps them from getting too cool and letting cold into the joints. This causes health problems which is what we are trying to avoid.

Take 3 deep breathes, in through the nose, out through the mouth to expel your old air and bring in fresh air. After 3 breaths, continue breathing, but only breathe in and out with the nose. Your tongue should rest on the top of your mouth, touching your teeth. This completes a connection for the energy to flow.

As you breathe, count. For instance, you begin to inhale, just start counting 1...2...3...4... until you finish inhaling. Then you exhale and start over from 1. This counting is there for you to focus on. If you lose count/focus, just start over at 1 again. This is not meant to count how long you are breathing, but to give you a focus point. Don't count too fast or slow, around 1 count per second, and never count above 10. If you reach 10 and are still on that same breath start at 1 again.

As you do this, other thoughts will enter your head. Remember, this is completely natural. Simply note that you have a thought and return focus to the counting, as you learned in lesson 2. After a short time the thought will leave and you will have no trouble focusing on the counting again. Even if you do, stick with it. There are days when focus does not come easy, even to the most experienced meditator.

When you finish the meditation, take your time getting up. Rub your limbs to return circulation and to close the pores. Start with your face and head, your upper body and lower body. Slowly stretch your legs as they will be stiff from sitting in position. No need to rush and fall down because your legs are asleep!

I know I was very detailed here, but the meditation itself is very simple. It's much easier to see in person. Good luck, and remember if a position isn't comfortable you can try a different position. Just try to maintain good spine alignment.

Exercise 6 - Chan Meditation

As before, practice this meditation at least 3 times before moving on to the next lesson. If you can perform it daily for a week, that would be outstanding. Be sure to keep track of your experiences in your training journal.

Lesson 6 – Visual Focus Meditation

By Jax

I'd like to switch up the meditation a bit this week and do a visual focus meditation. Assuming you're taking this course at the same time as Force 101 as we recommend, you've already done one type of visual focus meditation when you focused on the dot. This week we're going to focus on something a little more 'alive' - a flame. This is something that I would expect everyone has done while camping or at a bonfire. Who hasn't been mesmerized by a flame? But this week we're going to do this consciously. I hope that this will help those who have been struggling to clear their mind.

The exercise is one I found online. Rather than rewrite it at this point in time, I'm going to post it as is. However, do not feel like these rules are set in stone. If you don't have the ideal lighting level, that's fine. Experiment, but of course be safe so we don't have any fires getting out of control. That includes resisting any urge to manipulate the flame - maintain your focus. Also, if you have the option, I recommend a white or blue candle. These are healing colors, giving you an added benefit in the meditation.

The meditation is found in its entirety at http://www.focalpointyoga.com/object_meditation.htm. I'll post it here also. As usual, do it at least 3 times before moving on. If candles don't work for you, then try water - a moving stream, a fountain, whatever works so long as it is moving, or perhaps the clouds in the sky - taking care to avoid the sun. Be creative and try at least two different foci if possible. Don't forget to describe your experience in your training journal. After you have completed these meditations, submit your training journal for feedback from the instructor.

Exercise 7 – Candle Meditation

Meditation on a Candle: This is a particularly strong technique for learning to meditate. Self-Realization and spirituality are often described in terms of light: enlightenment, illumination, radiance, glow, halo, brilliance. The element of light appears in many descriptions of spirituality, and meditation on a candle can awaken the spiritual element by conveying an impression of this illumined condition.

The candle flame attracts the eyes to increase your ability to focus on a single object. The light makes an impression on the retina that can be retained when the eyes are closed, heightening awareness and illuminating consciousness.

HOW TO:

1. Darken your meditation room -no glaring sunlight or lamps - just perhaps a soft light - the light level should be as it is at dusk - not completely dark, but only a very low level of light in the room. light a candle and place it in front of you, preferable at eye level so you will not need to tilt your neck. Read the preparation for meditation on the Meditation Techniques page. Come to a comfortable seated position, with the spine erect, shoulders down and back, the body relaxed, breath fluid and easy. Relax and breath. Fully land yourself in your body and breath. Focus only on the breath flowing into and out of your body. Let any other thoughts go. The mind tries to distract you with thoughts - it is the nature of the mind. Release the thoughts. Without judgment, bring your awareness back to the breath, the life force, flowing into and out of your body.
2. Fix your gaze on the flame of the candle. Hold your gaze steadily on the light of the flame for several minutes. Continue to let any intruding thoughts go, keeping your awareness on the flame. Allow the flame to hold your full attention.
3. Close your eyes. You may choose to place your palms over your eyelids, to block external light. Keep your hands and arms relaxed. Retain the image of the candle flame - holding the image steady. If the attention wanders, guide it back to the image of the flame without judgment. If the image fades, concentrate to bring the image back. You may need to open your eyes and gaze softly at the candle for a few moments to refresh the image. Then close your eyes and focus on the image of the flame inside your eyelids. Hold this image for 5 to 7 minutes.
4. Practice steps 1-3 several times. After several practice sessions, you may find it easier to focus and retain the image of the flame. As you become proficient, add this next step. As you focus on the image of the flame, use your concentration to bring the image forward slowly. Gradually, bring the image closer and closer, until you are enveloped by the image.
5. Merge with the image of the flame - become completely absorbed by it. At this point, there is no longer "Flame" and "ME". You are one. There is no more subject or object - there is only light and unity. Remain in this state as long as you desire.
6. When you are ready, slowly open your eyes. Take a few moments to become fully present in your body. Stretch your legs and arms, turn your head side to side to release the neck. Rest a few moments before standing.

Meditation on Other Objects: This follows the same principles as described above. The differentiation between the SELF and the OBJECT is removed. You focus on your object until there is no longer "it" and "Me" - there is only one. This is the state of meditation. It takes practice and patience, so do not expect to achieve this blissful state of unity right away. Practice and regardless of whether you achieve this state of unity or not, you will find your focus and ability to concentrate increase, your ability to be calm and balanced grows and your general feeling of well-being is enhanced.

ENJOY THE JOURNEY - IT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE DESTINATION.

Lesson 7 – Meditating with Trees

This week you are learning about the Living Force in Force 101 (assuming you are taking the course and maintaining a weekly schedule). Therefore, this meditation is going to be an exercise in merging with trees, which usually have a strong presence in the Force. This exercise has many parts, but we're only going to do the first part for simplicity. Feel free to experiment. If it is too cold for you to try this with trees outside, try to find some trees inside or another plant. If you are having trouble finding an object to play with, ask the instructor for some help. Also, if you find 9 breaths aren't enough for you, feel free to take more. Have fun with this. Trees can be great teachers and also healers. It's hard to remain stressed while spending time amongst the trees.

If you find this meditation difficult, I'd like to share a little nugget of wisdom Inari learned about trees. As humans, we have a tendency to experience the world through our external senses, especially the sensations we experience with our skin. Trees, however, are inwardly focused. They don't sense temperature with their 'skin', as their bark is there for protection. Instead they focus on the movement of fluids internally. In a sense, it's like paying attention to the flow of blood throughout your body. So if you're getting stuck on this meditation, think inwardly and don't focus on your skin.

Please do this a few times this week, keeping track of your experiences in your training journal. Also, please share your experiences in the discussion forums. Enjoy!

Exercise 8 – Meditation with Trees

By Cáit Branigan

Introduction

The Standing Ones, as they are known among certain tribes of North America, have long held the adoration, fascination and awe of human beings. From Egypt and Crete to our own land, Ireland, trees have been a vital source of inspiration and protection. The five sacred trees of Ireland, namely the Oak of Mugna, the Yew of Ross, the Bile Tortan, the Bile Daithí and the Craeb Uisneach were the physical and spiritual manifestation of the profound wisdom of tree life on the planet. Not only are trees recognised for their importance in ecological terms, but also, as folklore and mythology testify, for being the dwelling place of gods and goddesses. Many traditions testify to the existence of such myths - in Egypt the fig was seen as a dwelling for the divine; in Britain and Ireland the Yew and the Oak were revered, among others, for their wisdom and nourishment.

Meditation is an important part of any spiritual discipline and, in modern society, has been taken up by stress management consultants as a deep means of relaxation. To enter into stillness and reach a point of knowledge of oneself is not only hugely beneficial to both body and spirit, but also helps us to tap into our source of wisdom.

So where do the two meet, and why would we wish to meditate with trees? Meditation with trees is on one level, a way of accessing the wisdom inherent in trees, wisdom that exists in their biology, and in the ancient and current contact with the land. It is a way of re-establishing the union that exists between all living things, of accessing the web of life of which we are a part. Trees have been around longer than humans, and like whales, have memories that stretch far back into the distant past. Their view of time is different to humans as they live longer lives in the main, and are deeply in tune with the cyclical nature of the seasons which we have chosen to disregard for the past century or so. They provide us with a connection to all the levels of existence - their roots reach deep into the earth and draw nourishment from the soil; their trunk stands strong and tall in the world around, unashamedly; their branches reach far above to the air, which provides clarity and the breath of life.

On a physical level, being around trees and breathing around trees is of huge benefit. They cleanse the air and their strong physical presence gives us a sense of security and protection. They provide us with food, in the form of fruit; and their bark, leaves and flowers have been used in herbal and aromatherapy remedies for centuries.

So how do we meditate with trees?

There are various methods available to people to help them to meditate with trees. Books fill shelves in shops around the world which explain at great length our connection to tree and plant life and how to consciously establish that connection. Below are some simple techniques that are easy to remember, yet can help people to establish deep and lasting relationships with trees. It is a good idea to prepare yourself before you head out to the park/ woods to make sure that you have everything you need: in other words, make sure you have warm clothing (if it is not Summer), rain-gear, ground mat in case the earth is wet. And anything else which you desire to have with you. There is no need to bring the kitchen sink!! Just enough to make sure that you are properly organised.

Breathing & Visualisation

This meditation was given to me during a shamanic journey to the spirit of trees. It is very simple and focuses on both the body and the mind.

Begin by finding a comfortable sitting position with your back against a tree. When you are ready, begin to consciously relax your muscles, maybe by mentally noting the dif-

ferent parts of your body and 'telling them' to relax. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath and let tension slip away. Feel the air around you. Feel the tree at your back. Feel the earth beneath you. Take another deep breath. Feel the safety and protection of the tree, feel its life.

Now take nine deep breaths. Slowly breath in and slowly breath out. With every breath you take, feel yourself move further and further into the tree - through the bark and right into the centre of the tree.

When you reach this point notice how you feel being in the centre of this tree. What if anything do you see there? What if anything do you hear? Stay there for as long as feels comfortable.

Now begin to take nine deep breaths once again. With every breath feel yourself move further out of the tree and deep into your own body. Concentrate on your feet and the earth beneath you.

Once you have taken the nine breaths, open your eyes. Look around you and continue to breath. Take time to make sure you are fully back in your body.

Lesson 8 – Walking Meditation

By Jax

This week we're going to have a slightly different lesson. So far we've tried many different kinds of meditation which had one thing in common - you didn't move. However, moving meditations have unique characteristics that can be quite beneficial. For instance, sitting meditation can easily give a person a feeling of withdrawing from the world, cutting them off from things outside of them. If you do that while walking you just might hurt yourself! So moving meditation brings about a greater sense of awareness. It also brings you more fully into your body, not just your mind or spirit, enhancing connection. In addition, it is more easily translatable into all aspects of your life. How often can you sit and meditate while at work? Probably not too often. How often do you walk from one place to another? It isn't difficult to turn that walk into a walking meditation.

This is certainly not the only benefit of walking and moving meditations. This week, take some time to reflect on the different experiences you have, comparing the various sitting meditations and the walking meditation. Did you find one type easier or more difficult? Was one more effective at calming your mind than the other? Also, note other times in your life when motion creates a meditative state for you. What works for you? Please discuss these questions in the discussion forum.

Buddhanet has a few different instructions for walking meditations. The first is part of their basic meditation course, and starts half way through. You are welcome to read the beginning as a review and to give you visuals that may aid you in some areas that still cause you trouble. The class starts here, or if you want to skip straight to the walking meditation, you can do that here. I'm going to include the two pages on walking meditation as well for those reading this without internet access.

Another option is to read this article, which I'll add at the end of this lecture for simplicity. What I'd like you to focus on is just the left right motion for the first time through. If you're feeling confident, feel free to note left, lifting, right, lifting. However, you might be surprised to see just how difficult that is! Walking is another deceptive activity that seems simple until you really focus on it. Try not to get frustrated. It's ok if you feel like an uncoordinated mess. I know I did the first time I tried it. It was the most difficult meditation experience. I was thinking about everything, losing my balance; I learned a lot. Since this is only a week long assignment, you probably won't get beyond noting the step and lifting, and that's ok. I'd rather you get comfortable with that than to push to try to get all 6 parts in (not shown below, see the website for the rest). Feel free to practice this for longer than a week, of course, and try other parts.

And finally, walking meditation is recommended as a longer meditation - 30 to 60 minutes. I know you don't always have that kind of time. Try to do 10 or 15 minutes if possible, though it would be beneficial to fit a longer session in during your day off from work or school. Since there are so many 'moving parts' it can take longer to relax. Just do your best.

As always, share your experiences in the forum too so everyone can benefit. This activity is typically a great equalizer as few have paid much attention to their walking since they first learned to do it as a toddler! As usual, remember to keep track of your experiences in your journal.

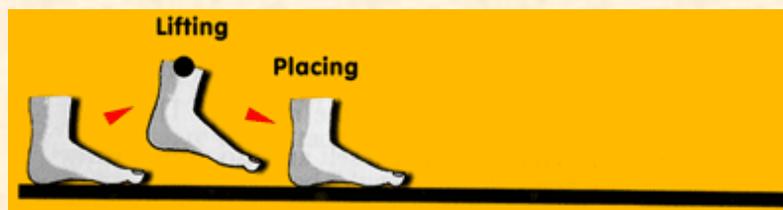
Exercise 9 - Walking Meditation

(Text from the Buddha-net lesson)

Now we'll try the walking meditation. How to do it? Well, first you find a level track about 15 to 20 paces and walk back and forth noting the parts of the steps in the walking. Don't worry, it's all explained in the diagrams that follow, and there's a flow chart with more instruction as well - we look after you very nicely here.



Start simply by noting the steps: 'right, left', 'right, left' for the first five minutes of so, until you settle.



Then mentally note the parts of the steps: 'lifting', 'placing', concurrent with the experience of the movement.



Slow down and keep a relaxed, but alert awareness as you note the 'lifting', 'pushing', placing.

Insight Meditation Workshop

By Ven. Pannyavaro

Technique in Walking Meditation

(<http://www.buddhanet.net/xmed7.htm>)

While meditation is usually associated with the sitting posture, insight meditation exercises can be practised while walking. Walking in insight meditation is essentially about the awareness of movement as you note the component parts of the steps. When walking meditation alternates with sitting meditation it helps to keep the meditation practice in balance.

Walking meditation is also a skilful way to energise the practice if the calming effect of sitting is making you dull or you are becoming over concentrated. Actually, it can be the preferred mode in insight meditation as it is meditation in action.

How to do it ...

Establish your attentiveness by first noting the standing posture and the touch sensations of the feet at the start of the walking track. (You will need to find a walking path with a level surface from five to ten metres on which you walk back and forth). The arms should hang naturally with the hands lightly clasped in front. Allow the eyes to gaze at a point about two metres in front of you on the ground to avoid visual distractions. Then as you walk keep the attention on the sole of the foot, not on the leg or any other part of the body.

For the first five minutes you can note just three parts of the step: 'lifting', 'pushing', 'dropping'. Then mentally note or label each step part by part building up the noting to its six component parts: 'raising', 'lifting', 'pushing', 'dropping', 'touching' and 'pressing' - concurrent with the actual experience of the movement.

While walking and noting the parts of the steps you will probably find the mind still thinking. Not to worry, keep focused on the noting of the steps if the thoughts are experienced just as 'background thoughts'. However, if you find you have been walking 'lost in thought' you must stop and vigorously note the thinking as 'thinking', 'thinking', 'thinking'. Then re-establish your attention on the movement and carry on. Also be careful that the mental noting does not become so mechanical that you lose the experience of the movement.

Try to do a minimum walking period of half an hour and build it up to a full hour. Strategically it is better to do a walking period before a sitting session as it brings balance into the practice. If you can alternate the walking and sitting sessions without any major breaks it will develop a continuity of awareness that naturally carries through into the awareness of your daily activities.

Wrapping Up

Congratulations for making it to the end! There are many kinds of meditation, so this course certainly is not meant to teach you everything there is to know about meditation. It should, however, have given you some valuable tools for use along your journey to become a Jedi. At this point I hope you have gained a better understanding of your mind and how to calm it down to the point where you can focus. You can use your breathing, counting, mantras, or objects to help focus your mind. You've also learned that meditation can be done in other situations to increase your awareness of yourself, other people, and other objects. If you have unanswered questions at this time, don't hesitate to ask. The more you learn, the more questions you'll have.

At this point, take some time to review your training journal. Look at where you started and where you are today. Even if meditation is a struggle, you have improved along the way. Growth is intensely personal and comes at whatever speed is appropriate for you. At this point, you are free to meditate in whatever way you prefer - just keep meditating! The instructors and other students are always available if you have questions as you go along. Keep up your meditation journal, either in the discussion forum at the Institute or as a paper journal - just make sure you have a backup of your online journal if that's your medium of choice. Occasionally go back to those first meditations and see just how much you've learned. You can also use it to keep track of those whispers of the Force that can pop up in your practice.

Best of luck with your training!

- Jax