

Sitting with Ease: Guidelines for Meditation

by Diana Lightmoon

Table of Contents

Introduction	Page 3
Setting intentions	Page 5
Posture and the body.....	Page 7
Some thoughts on thinking.....	Page 9
Emotions/feelings.....	Page 11
Calm/tranquil states.....	Page 13
Accepting vs resisting your experience.....	Page 15
Recollecting.....	Page 17
Working with a teacher.....	Page 18
About the author.....	Page 19

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Introduction

So often meditation is taught as a technique that will get you somewhere, usually to an idealized state of being in which everything, including you, will then be all right. This can create tension from striving as well as a sense of failure and self-blame when these perfect states are not achieved or able to be sustained. Often it is the very effort that is getting in the way and much of your actual experience is discounted.

In this book you will be introduced to a gentle, easy approach to meditation that supports an exploration of your inner world and increases awareness. By learning how to allow your unique experience to unfold naturally, not judging anything as unacceptable or mundane, you will find that your mind is able to find its own way to calmness and relaxation. With continued practice, qualities of heart such as kindness, friendliness, patience, trust, compassion, and acceptance will be cultivated.

Part of the learning in this form of meditation includes a process of recollecting your experience afterwards. By simply calling your experience back to mind at the end of the meditation, or writing it down in a journal, you can increase awareness and bring a spirit of investigation and inquiry into your sittings that will increase over time and also begin to filter into your daily life. In the beginning you might want to work closely with a teacher trained in this approach to facilitate your process, whether by sitting a retreat or sharing your journal, but with practice you will gain the confidence and skill to work more independently.

This approach to meditation is an innovation based on *Vipassana*, or insight meditation which comes from the Buddhist tradition, but it is not necessary to be a Buddhist or be interested in learning Buddhist philosophy or psychology to practice or benefit from it. Whether your reasons for wanting to meditate are to learn to relax, to become more accepting, kind and compassionate towards yourself and others, and/or develop more self-awareness, this approach can help you. I do include some *Pali* and *Sanskrit* terms when I feel it is helpful. *Pali* was the language the teachings of the Buddha were written in and *Sanskrit* a later, classical language from India that more

people are familiar with.

My purpose in writing this booklet is to help you establish a daily meditation practice that you can make your own, or if you already have a practice to support you in making a transition to a less structured, more receptive practice that involves less tension and striving. Through my own experience of meditating this way and in working with students, I have seen the kind of change and transformation that can take place when one engages in this practice. My suggestion is to read through the entire booklet at least once before starting so you get the overview, and then the section on setting intentions just before sitting, each time until it is clear in your mind. The rest can be referred to after or between sittings as questions arise.

Setting intentions

While external conditions can make a difference in how easy or difficult it is to sit quietly in meditation, your internal attitude and expectations are probably much more important. Still, you will want to put some time and energy into discovering a time and a place where it is quiet enough that you won't get distracted. For some people the morning before they get into their day, or the kids wake up, is the best time, but others prefer the end of the day after they get off work, or everyone is in bed. For others sometime in the middle of the day may work. It is completely individual and may take some experimenting to find out for yourself. And it may not always be the same time every day. The important thing is that you know you won't be interrupted.

In the beginning it is probably a good idea to decide ahead of time how long you want to sit, set a timer, and sit until the timer goes off no matter what is happening in your meditation. A timer will keep you from looking at the clock which can be a total distraction. Keep your goals realistic, however: no more than 15-20 minutes at first and then work your way up slowly to 40 minutes. Eventually, as you begin to enjoy your time meditating, you may be able to dispense with the timer and sit as long as you like. I sometimes meditate for two hours in one sitting.

Essentially meditation is a time to be with, and give to, yourself. The more kindness and gentleness you can bring to the process of sitting with yourself, the more you will enjoy it. That's not to say that every sit will be one you will come out of saying, "Boy, that was good." That's not the point. But every minute of sitting in which you tolerate your experience, no matter what it is, will go far in terms of cultivating qualities of patience, kindness, equanimity, and compassion. You will also be able to see more of what is actually going on. In this regards, curiosity and interest in your experience are important, too.

When you sit, there's no way to know ahead of time where your mind will go. We all come to meditation with ideas about what it is and what we "should" be, or want to be, experiencing. The voice of the internal judge can be quite loud and harsh when our actual experience differs greatly

from our desires or expectations. This is when kindness towards yourself and interest in and curiosity about what is happening, will be tested sorely, and serve you well if you can muster it. In the beginning it's enough just to tolerate what is happening and to congratulate yourself when you do.

So it helps, just prior to sitting, to remind yourself of your intentions: 1) To sit quietly for a certain period of time, 2) to give permission for your experience to unfold naturally, 3) to be kind and gentle towards yourself, and 4) to be interested and curious about whatever your experience is.

Posture and the body

The important thing is to find a posture that you can sit in comfortably for the whole time. It makes no difference if you are sitting on the floor or in a chair, with legs crossed or not. It is not necessary to sit with your back perfectly straight. In fact, as you relax, your back will naturally begin slumping. That's okay. There is no right or wrong posture. There's just what works for you. You might need to play with posture for awhile to find which one(s) work best for you. And feel free to try lying down, too. For people who are ill and/or weak, or have back problems, lying down may be the best option.

The mind and the body do not exist separate from one another and bodily sensations will be part of your experience at times as you sit in meditation. Like all the rest of your experience, allow them into awareness with curiosity and interest. The body can also be used as an anchor in your meditation, a place to return to when you feel like you need it. By gently bringing your attention to the sensations of your buttocks on the chair or cushion, your hands in your lap, and the over-all feeling of sitting, you can ground yourself briefly in the flow of your experience. The sensations of breathing or your heart beating can have a similar grounding effect at times.

Emotion, which I will say more about in a later section, is in part, a somatic experience, and sometimes the first indication that a feeling or emotion is present will be through physical sensation, often in the viscera, but also the skeletal musculature. People who've learned to repress their emotions or feelings, may experience tightness and constriction in certain areas of their bodies as they sit that at times may become uncomfortable. Physical discomfort can be part of anyone's experience at some point.

While some practices advocate working directly with pain, in this practice we try to minimize it. This is one of the reasons that I suggest finding a posture that is comfortable for you. If physical pain or discomfort arises while you are sitting, pulling your attention towards it, I suggest you sit with it for awhile and gently investigate it, being aware as well of your thoughts and feelings. If you feel that moving, or changing your posture, will ameliorate the pain, then notice the desire and intention

to move, and then slowly do so, making it part of your meditation. It may or may not solve the issue, but you haven't disrupted your meditation in order to find out.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, there may be times when you have extremely pleasant sensations in your body, and paradoxically, these may sometimes develop from sensations that were originally uncomfortable. That's one reason why it's important not to make decisions about moving too quickly. Give your experience time to develop. There's no way to know what's going to happen relative to the pain or discomfort, and a lot depends on what's causing it, which is not always easy to see or know. In certain states of mind, the body and its sensations can completely disappear from awareness.

Some thoughts about thinking

Thinking has gotten a bad rap when it comes to meditation which has led to a lot of unnecessary struggle and suffering. Asking our minds to quit thinking is a little like asking our hearts to stop beating or our lungs to quit breathing. Yet this is the expectation or hope that many of us bring to meditation. In some cases, it's a primary motivation to learn meditation which can lead to an internal war. This is hardly the right condition for cultivating inner peace.

It's not that our minds can't slow down and thinking fall away for periods of time. The question is more: How does this happen? Most meditation techniques have been developed as a way to give the mind something to focus on besides thought. Whether it's the breath, or a mantra, the instructions are to drop thought and keep coming back to the object (ie breath or mantra). And for some people, some of the time, this actually works. But for most people, much of the time, it's a continual struggle and war. And the irony is that resisting thoughts tends to make them that much more persistent.

So in this way of meditating we let thinking go on. Just like all the rest of our experience it has a right, and a reason, to be. Our job is simply to be aware of it. Not in a labeling or noting mode as in some practices, but as just another aspect of our experience. It's even okay to get caught up in your thoughts and lose track of the fact that you're thinking, because sooner or later you will realize what is happening and come back to awareness. With time you will begin to trust this process. I feel safe in saying: you will always come back.

By not fighting your thoughts and giving yourself permission to get lost in them, you have the opportunity to observe how your mind functions in an everyday kind of way. You can see more about it. For example, if you're upset about something that happened during the day, as you get caught up in the story about it, you might notice some emotion, say anger, or maybe embarrassment, or even sadness, that's part of the experience. Now you're not just thinking, but also feeling. You're seeing more of the complexity of what actually goes on when you think, and that it doesn't operate independently of emotion.

Stories are the mind's basic unit of understanding and making sense of our experience. By getting curious about the stories we tell ourselves we begin to see some of the motivating forces in our lives. By listening to our stories we can find out what some of our core beliefs and views about ourselves and the world are. This can take some patience because these things are hidden or embedded in our stories in such a way that we usually take them for granted and don't see them. But as we look back at our actions and choices in life, we have the opportunity to reflect upon them in a way that could change how we do things in the future.

Even really mundane thinking like planning for a trip or making a list may tell us things about ourselves. For some people this type of thinking brings great pleasure and helps them feel secure. It may be a way of managing anxiety. Other people drive themselves crazy with their thinking, and as painful as it may be to tolerate it, by doing so they may begin to see what they're doing to themselves so that it slowly changes over time. Constant criticism may plague someone else. No matter what the internal dynamic, bringing it into the light of awareness, while painful at first, will have a beneficial effect. And, again, the first thing is to learn to tolerate it.

Once we get curious and interested in our thoughts, and stop fighting them, a strange thing may happen. Lo and behold, they can begin to slow down, and maybe even fall away and disappear for a while. Or they transform into nonsensical words or dream-like images. The process of getting interested in our thoughts can draw our minds inward to a calm, tranquil state, and a kind of trance, or what is called *samadhi*, develop. This is quite common. I will write more about these *samadhi* states in another chapter. What's important here is to know that this is a natural process that can, and often does, follow from accepting and being with your thoughts. That doesn't mean it always will, or even should. The point is simply that it can. The very state we fight our thoughts to obtain can develop once we surrender to and become interested in them. As with all our experience, our relationship to it is what makes the difference. And in the meantime, we get to learn a lot about ourselves.

Emotions and feelings

It is natural for emotions and feelings to arise during meditation. Sometimes they may be obvious, and at other times more subtle or embedded in our experience as a tone or flavor, and so not as visible. However they appear, they are there for a reason, and to be accepted and included. This may be easier for some emotions or feelings than others. We tend to enjoy happiness, elation, joy, even excitement for example, while have a more difficult time with anger, frustration, anxiety, or fear. Sitting with these latter emotions can be challenging because they involve activation of the sympathetic nervous system which primes us for fight or flight. The natural tendency when these feelings arise is to move, act, do, so sitting with them calls for more restraint. A great deal of wisdom can be developed if you are able to see how anger fuels certain thoughts (and vice versa) while not acting on them. At high levels of activation, however, sitting may be counterproductive. It may make more sense to walk or do some other physical activity in which you can also attend to your inner process. This would still be considered meditation.

Because life inevitably brings loss, sadness or grief is an emotion that will often arise in response to life's vicissitudes. Meditation can be a solace in these times, providing a way to be with these feelings and see deeper into them and their causes. This is all part of the process of surrendering and letting go. For some people sadness is more comfortable and acceptable; others may fight it for various reasons. If you have a view that you should be happy, these feelings might contradict your sense of self. The same could be said for anger, too. Many people don't like to think of themselves as being angry. Yet it's essential to make room for all emotion to show itself to get the most from your meditation.

Emotions don't happen separate from thoughts and sensations. In fact, if you think about what an emotion is, it's difficult to define. Daniel Siegel, a psychiatrist, defined them as the linkage of differentiated components of a system. The system here is you, or your mind and body. Anxiety may be a churning in your belly, but is that all it is? Isn't it also the thoughts churning in your mind as well? As you begin to look at your experience of these

feelings and emotions, you will see how they operate inside you. You will begin to distinguish between them with more clarity and subtlety and realize they have more gradation and elements than you had been aware of before. More importantly, you will learn how they influence your behavior for better or worse, and develop more skillfulness in being with them.

Calm, tranquil states

This is what most people come to meditation to experience and what most meditation techniques are designed to induce. As I stated earlier, however, these expectations and techniques can also create a lot of frustration. If you can remember that just the act of sitting still, no matter what is going on in your mind, is a type of calmness, it will help you to value your meditation regardless of the content. It may also help you begin to recognize the more subtle clues that relaxation and calmness are being cultivated simply by sitting and being with your experience.

There is a whole range of states between sleeping and waking that you can experience in meditation, and at times you may veer towards sleepiness or even into sleep. This is okay. Allow yourself to move in this direction if this is where your mind is taking you. It is only afterward that you can evaluate whether or not where you have been was actually sleep, and even then you may not be certain. Allowing yourself to explore dreamy and more sleep-like states will give you access to beneficial states of mind that you might otherwise miss out on. It is not necessary to maintain a certain level of wakefulness, or "being present," as that will limit where your mind can go, and also set up a kind of tension from the effort.

As I stated earlier, these calm, tranquil states are called *samadhi*, which is a Pali word. Pali is the language that the Buddhist suttas or discourses were originally spoken in, then written down. Sometimes *samadhi* is translated as concentration, but it actually refers to a state that develops as the mind becomes drawn inward and secluded from the outer world. This often happens when it gets focussed on something, like the breath, or a body sensation, or even thoughts. That's why as you get interested in your experience, you will begin to be drawn into these states. You don't have to work at it.

By allowing these states to develop naturally, you will eventually be able to see more about them, ie how they develop, what qualities they have, and how they function in your meditation practice. But in the beginning it is enough to simply experience and enjoy them. Usually they are quite pleasant and soothing. They can be dream-like or they can

have a crisp quality of wakefulness to them, or something in-between. Sometimes it feels like being wrapped in a cocoon, at others like being bathed in warmth. There can be many different body sensations, like tingling or warmth or cold, or no sensations at all. There can be images or washes of color, or no visual aspect to the experience at all. They may come with refined emotions of loving-kindness, or compassion or no emotion at all.

There are so many variations of these states that it would be impossible to make an exhaustive list. It would also be counter-productive, as what's important is your experience of them. It's not about trying to match someone else's experience, or even to replicate specific states once you've had them. Over time you will become more familiar with this inner territory and develop your own language for describing it. Every state has its own qualities and parameters that conditions what can, or cannot, happen within it. Your ability to discern this will develop with practice over time.

Accepting versus resisting your experience

Despite your best intentions, there will times when you meditate in which you find yourself in conflict, wanting something else to happen than what is actually going on. This is normal. Welcome to planet earth and being human. How many times in your life have you experienced this exact same dilemma? So here you are again. And you thought meditation was going to be different, right? Well, sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't. Remember the saying, "Wherever you go, there you are?"

People devise a lot of strategies to get away from experiences they don't want to have. This happens in meditation, too. This is most often when people resort to tricks or techniques. You may find yourself doing this, too, especially if you've learned some other way of meditating before trying this way. You may suddenly feel like saying your mantra or following your breath, in a desperate attempt to get somewhere else than where you currently are in your meditation. You may or may not be successful at this, however, depending on a lot of different factors.

Whatever you do, however you resolve the conflict, there is something to learn from the process. If something is calling for your attention, no matter how many times you try to get away from it, it will keep coming back. This can happen many times in one meditation if you're resisting a particular experience, and it can happen over days, weeks, and even years of your practice in terms of the recurring themes and conflicts of your life. The issues of your life will not just go away because you want them to, but if you allow them into your meditation, accepting them as part of your spiritual path, a deep transformation can slowly take place.

Acceptance is one of those words that sounds simple, but really can be quite complicated. In theory it means including everything in our practice, but the reality of our psyches makes it more of a process than an event. That's why I often talk about tolerance as I think it's easier to negotiate. In the beginning, it may be all you can do to tolerate a given experience. And you may have to titrate it at that, allowing a little bit in at a time. Resistance has its place, too. We all have our limits and

it's important to respect them. This is where gentleness comes in. Even your resistance and conflict need acceptance. There is no right or wrong thing that can happen. There's just what is happening and all the layers of reaction or response to it.

Recollecting

When you have finished meditating, it is good to spend some times afterwards recollecting what happened during your meditation. This can be done by simply calling it back to your mind in a reflective way, or more formally through journaling. We hear the word "mindfulness" a lot these days, and often it is used to denote a type of attention we bring to our experience in the moment as it is happening. The term was used originally as a translation of the Pali word *sati*, which also means memory. So this remembering of what happened in your meditation is another aspect of mindfulness. It is an additional way of cultivating awareness and learning from your experience.

In recollecting or keeping a journal, it is important to describe your experience in your own words, not using psychological, spiritual, or any other jargon. Try to get as close to your raw experience as possible in your description, without interpreting it. This can be challenging because we don't have a lot of language for talking about meditative experiences. You can use metaphor if you can't quite get to it with literal language. It doesn't have to be done chronologically. Write things down as you remember them. Consider all of the aspects of experience we covered here and how they showed up in your meditation, ie thoughts, sensations, emotions, calm, etc. You may find that once you start, more comes back to you. The more you can remember of the sequence of your experience, the better, though that will be something that will develop over time. Transitions between different experiences can be particularly helpful when you see them.

It's quite common to get insight during the journaling but in terms of learning about your meditation experience *per se*, you might want to bracket off those things that come to you in the journaling process and weren't actually in the sit itself. Then you don't have to censor yourself but you also have a clear record of what happened during your sit. Since this journaling is meant to help you develop more skill in meditating, this distinction can be important. Being able to see how different states and experiences arose and what choices you made is part of the learning. It brings a quality of investigation and inquiry into your meditation practice, which cultivates the development of wisdom as well as awareness.

Working with a teacher

In the beginning, it is particularly useful to work with a teacher. A good teacher will encourage you and help you to value your unique meditation experience. She will also help you to see and understand what is going on in your meditation so that your practice can grow and develop. This is all done in the spirit of collaboration and with respect towards you and your experience. For most people there is a sense of being seen and understood so that a relationship of trust develops that allows for a deeper inner exploration.

This work is best done in small groups in which everyone meditates together and then has the opportunity to report if they want. In my groups, I then ask questions to help them remember or see more about the sit, or to look at something they've learned from an experience. This helps a person's meditation practice develop in ways that are individual to him or her. Having someone listen to and be interested in your meditation will enhance your curiosity. The mutual exploration and inquiry into the experience models and encourages the kind of investigation you can do in your sit on your own. Learning happens by listening to other people's experience as well. It is not a sharing in the usual sense of the word, as depending on the size of the group, not everyone gets to report each time. Those that do are encouraged to take as much time as they need so they can go in depth into their sits.

It is also possible to work one-on-one via email and phone. This works best for people who do not live near by and can't come to groups, classes, or workshops on a regular basis. In this case, you would sit every day for a week or five days and journal about the sits, sending a copy of your journal entries via email, and setting up a time to talk about it together over the phone. This can be done as often as wanted or needed.

About the author

Diana Lightmoon has been practicing meditation for 19 years, 13 of these in the tradition of Vipassana. She has been teaching since 2003. She was president of the Santa Fe Vipassana Sangha from 2003- 2005. She has studied and practiced with many teachers, but most extensively with Jason Siff of the Skillful Meditation Project from 2004-2007, including two and half years of teacher training and Buddhist philosophy and psychology. It was he who introduced her to this way of meditating. Diana is also a licensed psychotherapist and massage therapist and a Certified Rosen Method Bodywork Practitioner. She teaches and practices in Santa Fe, NM but also travels to offer workshops and retreats in other areas upon request.

All her teaching is done in the tradition of *dana*, a Pali word meaning generosity or giving. This tradition goes back to the time of the Buddha when the monks and nuns went on daily alms round with bowl in hand to receive support in the form of food so that they could survive and continue to practice and offer the *dharma*, the teachings. In the same way, she graciously receives whatever you feel moved in your heart to give to support the teaching. This book is offered in the same spirit.

For more information visit www.evening-sun.com/diana.

Diana can be contacted at dlightmoon@comcast.net or 505-577-4607.

Her address is 29 Chapala Rd Santa Fe NM 87508