
MEDITATION IN SIX STEPS

by

David Stevens

Meditation plays a part in the daily lives of people everywhere, and comes in many forms. It may be part of a devotional, yogic or tantric practice, a relaxation or fitness routine, or an autonomous activity.

The meditator may be still and silent, or active in a variety of ways - in chanting, prayer, song or music, in feasting or fasting, in dance, drama, ritual enactment, with images and visualizations and in martial arts, to name only the most obvious.

The meditator may have an aim, and these are likewise many, from union with a godhead or universal enlightenment to relief from stress or anxiety; it is probably true that in all cases a cessation or suspension of the sense of self is part of the process.

Perhaps for this reason meditation may be thought of as unworldly, like a trance in which contact with reality is lost. Nothing could be further from the truth - meditation is direct experience of actuality as it happens.

Meditation may be engaged in with no aim, simply for itself, as an activity and an experience - a frame through which to see the world, apparently new, but representing our original, unconditioned and unconditional frame of mind.

No special equipment is needed. The method given here derives from the Japanese sitting meditation *za-zen* and a firm cushion or folded blanket may be useful, whether sitting or kneeling; for the latter posture, some may wish to use a support. (See illustration)

Whilst these devices may make the postures a little more comfortable, they should not be regarded as essential, as indeed neither should a particular posture.

You may find a few warm-up exercises helpful to loosen and relax you, and you might like to repeat these after meditation. (See illustration)

Each section which follows has a suggested time for practice, building up from five to thirty minutes. Do them at any pace you wish, repeating each until you feel ready to go on to the next. If you wish to return to practice a previous section, feel free to do so. It is as much a process of unlearning as of learning.

As with other equipment, use a timing method on which you will not come to depend. If you have a watch or clock, put it near you and glance at it when you think the time is up, or set an alarm if you prefer, so long as it does not give you too much

of a jolt. If you have a tape recorder, you might like to record each interval, begun and ended with a handclap, bell or other sound, beforehand. Let time pass and you will need no timekeeper.

When I teach meditation I try to enable people to practice meditation anywhere and at any time, during daily life and simultaneously with other activities.

Meditation is not a state but a process through which, as William Burroughs writes (*The Job* Grove Press 1974 p91) we realise that we "DON'T HAVE TO THINK ... Like a moving film the flow of thought seems to be continuous while actually the thoughts flow, stop, change and flow again. At the point where one flow stops there is a split-second hiatus. The new way of thinking grows in this hiatus between thoughts ..."

Sitting

Meditation does not require any particular posture, but some postures make it easier, especially when learning. The postures most often associated with meditation are sitting and kneeling, the kind of position children take up with ease in our society, but which as we grow up, we abandon in order to sit on chairs.

Throughout most of the world, however, it remains natural for people of all ages to sit or kneel, indoors or out, while working, eating, talking, or meditating. This position, close to the ground, provides stability and balance. With legs crossed or folded, providing a broad base of support, our backs will remain upright with the least effort, enabling us to relax and breathe freely.

The most important aspect of posture for meditation, and not

just when sitting or kneeling, is the body's centre of gravity, the spot where all our weight is focussed. The closer this is to the ground, the more stable is our posture, and the more comfortable.

As you sit or kneel, pay attention to how your weight is distributed. You may find that, because you have become unfamiliar with the basic postures, your legs or back become tense. This will raise your centre of gravity, making you less stable and increasing your discomfort. If you relax, from the top of your head downwards, through your neck, shoulders, chest, back, arms, stomach, hips, legs, knees, ankles and feet, you will feel your centre of gravity fall until it comes to rest in the area below your navel. This area is called the one-point.

In the practice of meditation, attention to the one-point is the first step. Whenever difficulties arise in meditation, attention to the one-point provides first-aid, a point from which to begin again.

Now, if you are not already doing so, sit or kneel comfortably, using a cushion if you wish. Settle your hands on your knees or in your lap. Take a slow deep breath, and begin to relax from the top of your head down to the tips of your toes. Feel your centre of gravity fall and settle at the one-point.

If you become tense, or the posture uncomfortable, breathe deeply, relax and settle again, all the time attending to the one-point. You have five minutes.

Breathing

In all forms of meditation, great importance is placed on the breath. If we are to function well and easily, we

need a good and steady supply of oxygen, and an equally reliable process for getting rid of carbon dioxide, which is formed in our bodies when sugar and oxygen react to release energy.

These two functions are accomplished as we breathe in and out, and the most effective breathing will be balanced between these two aspects of the process, allowing each to happen to its full extent before naturally beginning the other, complementary action. Breathing should be easy, continuous and full.

Our lungs are large, spongy organs which fill our chests. Around them are the ribs and below them is the diaphragm, an elastic muscle which stretches and shrinks to draw air into our lungs or squeeze it out.

As the diaphragm falls, we breathe in and as it rises we breathe out. Sometimes this action is strong, and we breathe deeply, to the bottom of our lungs. Sometimes, however, the action of the diaphragm is weak and we breathe only shallowly, in the throat or upper chest.

Shallow breathing is not as effective as deep breathing, and often occurs when we are excited, anxious, under stress or tired. When we yawn, it is because we have been breathing shallowly, and need more oxygen from a long, deep breath.

You will know when you are breathing deeply, from the diaphragm, when you feel your stomach muscles expanding and contracting as you breathe. You will feel the breath flowing in through your nose, down your throat into your chest, and on down to fill the depths of your lungs as your diaphragm falls and your stomach pushes out to make room.

For a moment the breath is still, as the blood in the lungs gives up carbon dioxide and takes in oxygen. Then the diaphragm begins to rise, forcing the stale air out and allowing your stomach to contract as the lungs shrink upward. A moment of emptiness, and then, as your diaphragm begins to fall, a new breath of fresh air flows in.

So that you can see the difference in breathing, rest one hand on your upper chest, the other over your one-point, and breathe so that the upper hand moves most. Although your chest will be expanding and contracting, the air is not reaching the larger part of your lungs.

It is difficult to keep up this sort of shallow breathing because it is not very effective, and leads to tension. Now breathe so that your lower hand moves most. Your chest is now expanding more than before, but downwards rather than outwards. The lungs are being filled and emptied from the bottom, making most effective use of them, in a relaxed cycle of expansion and contraction, activity and rest.

In one of the basic postures, as you relax from the head downwards, breathe deeply and slowly, bringing the focus of your breathing to rest at the one-point. As you attend to the one-point, attend also to the flow and extent of your breathing. As your breath changes, observe it but do not try to control it actively. Just as your posture becomes easier and more stable as you relax and attend to the one-point, so does your breath. You have ten minutes for practice.

Sensing

Meditation does not happen in a vacuum, but in an actual world where things happen all the time. Furthermore, our bodies and minds are continuously changing, and we become aware of these events, in ourselves and in the world, through our senses. As well as the externally directed senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, we have internal senses of hunger, thirst, time, temperature, movement, balance, tension, relaxation, discomfort, nausea, and pain, amongst others.

Because in meditation we do as little as possible, the information of our senses is not blocked out by concentration on activity or by selecting only part of it for attention, as we might do when turning off a radio when trying to read. Instead, we attend to everything as it happens.

As each event occurs and each sensation succeeds or is superimposed on the last, we are aware of the change. As each sensation passes away, we are as aware of its ending as we were of its beginning. As each sensation lasts, we are continuously aware of its existence.

Some sensations are sudden, like a dog barking, and others grow gradually, like an uncomfortable posture. Some sensations, like a clock which stops ticking or the relief of pain, are of something not happening, but are no less real in our experience. All sensations are changeable and pass away.

In meditation we allow sensations to arise without blocking or selection; our attention is undivided. Even while attending to breathing from the one-point, other sensations, inner and outer, are attended to, as

is the continuous process of change in which we flow.

As sensations change and pass away, we are aware of their passage without seeking to preserve or prolong them. This process of letting-go is the essential component in meditation, allowing us access to everything which occurs, and the opportunity to examine the relations and connexions between events, without interference from ourselves.

In basic posture, relaxed and breathing from the one-point, allow your attention to settle with your breath. Do not focus on sensations as they arise, nor ignore them, but attend to them all without reacting selectively to one or the other. As they change and pass away, attend to their ending, and let them go. You have fifteen minutes for practice.

Thinking

Just as sensations arise and pass away, so do thoughts and feelings, sometimes associated with events in the world, and sometimes flowing from ourselves.

Sensations, thoughts and feelings can each lead to others, in a continuous flow of involvement. Letting go of sensations means not routinely following them with thoughts and feelings, not reacting to them unnecessarily.

If a dog barks, it is enough to hear it; we do not need to think 'dog' or wonder what it looks like. Once we react with a thought like this, we are no longer attending to events as they happen, but recalling or anticipating them.

Thoughts, ideas, memories, images, expectations, also arise on their own, with little or no

apparent relation to other events. In meditation, we allow them to arise, to change, and to pass away just as we do for sensations. We do not react to them, nor do we ignore them, but let them be without interference.

As one thought leads to another, or to a sensation or a feeling, we observe the flow, and let go of our thoughts. In basic posture, relaxed and breathing from the one-point, allow your attention to settle. You have twenty minutes for practice.

Feelings

Emotional feelings are our natural responses to events which affect our lives, and just as sensations and thoughts arise and flow continuously, so our feelings also become interwoven in the pattern of experience.

Some feelings are automatic, like fear after a loud noise, but most are learned in connexion with the events which we each have experienced.

As we have learned to associate the name dog to the sound of a bark, so, perhaps we associate dogs with pleasant or unpleasant experiences, and feel pleasure or anxiety when we hear a bark.

Thoughts can also produce feelings; the memory of past events, the anticipation of those not yet occurred, the image of a face or place from long ago or far away, can evoke feelings of pleasure or pain, hope or fear, confidence or anxiety, love, happiness, joy and many others.

In their turn, feelings may evoke sensations, as an emotionally painful experience may be accompanied by physical discomfort, and sensations have the

power to evoke feelings directly, as a familiar smell can flood us with feelings for the person or place with which we associate it.

In meditation, we let go of feelings as we do sensations and thoughts. We let them arise, change, interweave with each other and unfold one from the other, with undivided attention. As they pass we let them go. We observe without reacting to the undisturbed flow of events. We do not seek to prolong some feelings or ignore others, nor to direct them in any way, but to observe them and their interactions.

In basic posture, relaxed from head to toe and breathing easily from the one-point, with undivided attention to sensations, thoughts and feelings, let them all go. You have twenty-five minutes for practice.

Non-attachment

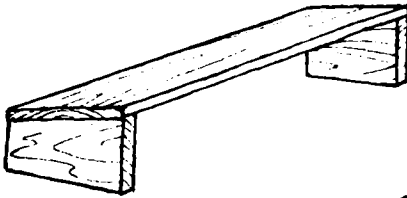
The events and experiences of daily life are the same as those of meditation; as changeable and impermanent as sensations, as complex as thoughts, as powerful as the feelings which they evoke. Just as the phenomena of meditation arise, change and pass away, so do those of daily life, of which meditation is a part.

Like the events experienced in meditation, daily life is to some extent our own construction, changing as a result of our involvement in it.

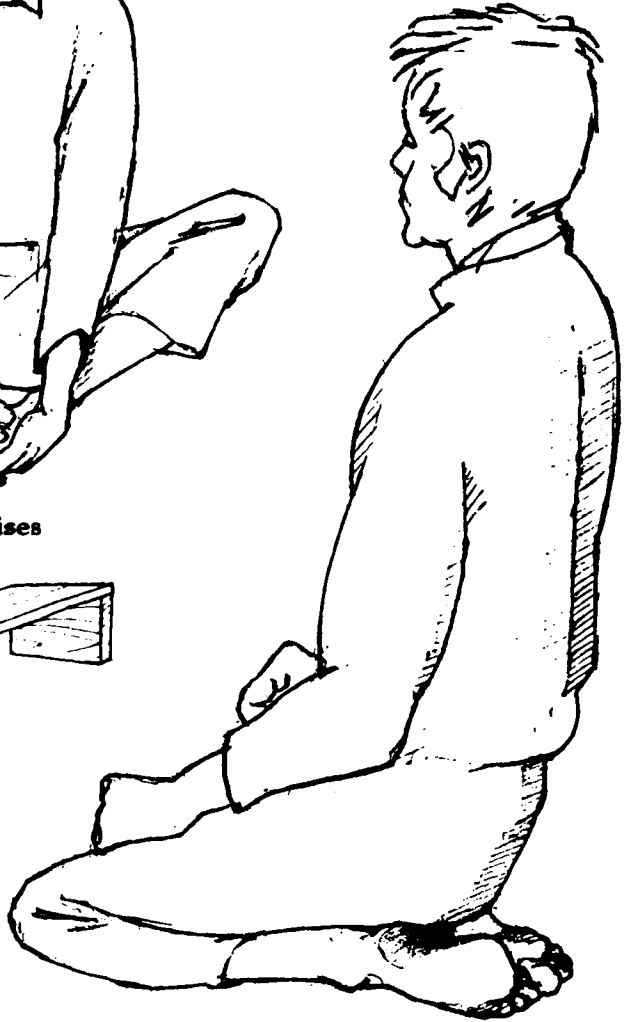
Much of what we see as the behaviour of other people is made up of their reactions to us, or to the situation in which we both are. Likewise, much of our behaviour is, in daily life as in meditation, unnecessary reaction to events, becoming an extra factor in their complex unfolding process.



Leg exercises



Kneeling stool



Kneeling

Our actions affect others, who react to us, and so a cycle of unnecessary reactions can begin, just as sensations, thoughts and feelings can follow each other relentlessly until their associations are exhausted.

Many of our reactions, as deeds, words, thoughts or feelings, are learned from childhood onwards, conditioned by the people and events which affect us and the course of our lives. They represent our experience of events, deeply coloured by the culture of time, place and society in which we have lived, but of which we remain, for the most part unaware. Habitual patterns of reaction, observed in the flow of sensations, thoughts and feelings in meditation, can equally be observed in daily life.

As in periods of meditation practice, the process of letting-go as events arise, change and pass away is the way to experience daily life. Non-attachment to persistent notions of ourselves, others and the world, flows from letting-go of our sensations, thoughts and feelings in meditation. Abandoning our conditioned reactions simplifies events, allowing us to observe their unfolding without unnecessary interference, and to interpret them without jumping to conclusions or avoiding them.

The practice of non-attachment in daily life is an extension of meditation. As well as timed periods in basic posture, meditation can be practiced during every moment of our daily life, no matter where we are or what we are doing.

Undivided attention and non-attachment are the essential features of meditation in daily

life, although one-pointedness of breath and body are also helpful.

Periods of basic meditation practice should not end when the time has passed, but should continue into daily life and be extended to other activities such as walking, gardening or other exercise as well as to personal interactions at work and socially. Time spent travelling can easily be used in meditation.

Non-attachment enables us to see more clearly how we and others work, how we interact, and how the world unfolds. Meditation enables us to wait with patience, to endure discomfort, to act only when necessary, to observe clearly the patterns in the flow of events and experience.

Meditation in daily life depends on non-attachment to the conditioned, habitual reactions which so often control us, directing our deeds, words, thoughts and feelings into unproductive cycles without our awareness. Letting-go of these relics of our past experience which we sometimes think of as our self, as representing our identity, enables us to deal more straightforwardly with the world and others.

What we know of ourselves through meditation, we can apply in our daily lives, enabling us to see others' reactions in the same light, making it easier to interact with them. The clarity of sensation, thought and feeling, the stability and balance of meditation can all extend throughout our daily life, becoming again, as it was for us as children, the natural way to be. Thirty minutes practice.

David Stevens is a lecturer in psychology who teaches meditation. The method outlined here was first given as a course at the Earth Exchange and later through the Haringey Learning Network, thanks to Christopher Rourke.