

KEEPING YOUR PRACTICE ALIVE

After you have been practicing meditation a while it can be easy to drift into a routine of almost perfunctory practice without really reflecting on what you are doing. Just as we encourage you to develop the ‘seven attitudinal pillars of mindfulness’ in the 8-week course, the encouragement now is to continue with these in addition to developing fruitful attitudes towards practice.

Fruitful attitudes are: Realistic, Flexible, Effective and progressive

Unhelpful attitudes are: Unrealistic, Over-idealised, Unsustainable, Rigid

An example of an unfruitful attitude would be ‘pressing on regardless’, as is meditating only when you feel like it. Looking for peak experiences is an unfruitful attitude as is the idea that meditation should always be pleasurable.

1) Developing and attitude of Learning

The art of life is the art of learning from our experience. We need to approach meditation with an attitude of learning and we can do this by noticing what works and what doesn’t, and what no longer works. At the end of a meditation asking yourself ‘What have I learnt?’ can be fruitful. At the beginning of the meditation try to bring to mind what you learnt last time and build on that. In this way self knowledge grows as well as our understanding about what helps us progress.

.... and Exploration

Consciously developing a sense of benign curiosity about your mind and heart in meditation – irrespective of the pleasant or unpleasant nature of your experience. You could ask yourself ‘What am I feeling?’ ‘What is missing in my practice just now?’

2) ‘Owning’ our experience...

To make progress we need to know and name the state of mind we are in and take full responsibility for it eg. Not just *knowing* that you are having an argument in your head but *feeling* that you are behaving with ill will towards yourself, acknowledging that (not making excuses for it), accepting it as yours and not somehow created by someone else. This is hard to do! We need to:

- a) Acknowledge and name the hindrance, own it as ‘mine’
- b) Bring curiosity to it
- c) Work creatively and sensitively with it. (see below)

All this means abandoning any guilt feelings which might arise if we start to have troublesome feelings such as anger, envy etc

We need **to work creatively with the state we are in**. Not condemning ourselves but not indulging ourselves either. Working creatively involves warm attention, sensitivity, reflection, intuition and will... The question is pragmatic: What helps us change from a negative to a positive state of mind?

3) Adjusting your expectations in relationship to your experience

We cannot help but have expectations of meditation. We need to make sure they are **realistic** and **sensitive** to what is actually happening in our practice. Eg. If you are very

sleepy you need to lower your expectations and try to just stay awake, work on your posture etc. That is enough. **Consciously examine your expectations** when you begin the practice and try to **objectively assess** how the practice went at the end. You may have unhelpful expectations like 'I bet I won't get anywhere with this'. This is **all part of an attitude of learning**.

4) Finding new (imaginative) approaches to practice

Meditation is more like an art than a technique (even though refinements of technique can be fruitful). What can happen once we have meditated for a while is **we get stuck in working in the practice in habitual ways**. This is quite natural but needs to be worked with if we are to keep our meditation alive. We need to experiment from time to time with new approaches and angles.

No one method will work all the time. At the same time searching for mere novelty misses the point. Reading about meditation can help but especially classes and retreats – often you find a new angle, a new approach, which reinvigorates your practice.

See below for some ideas about how to keep your practice alive.

5) Setting up a daily practice

We need to develop the healthy self-discipline of a daily meditation practice. Ie. Building it into your daily routine, finding supports such as regular time, pleasant space etc. It means **being realistic** about how much time you can meditate and having the support of others who are also trying to meditate.

Part of the healthy self-discipline is not making too big a deal if you miss a day (or more!), but through trial and error, with patience and kindness, building up a regular practice.

6) Maintaining and then developing

This is an attitude of becoming aware of what you have already developed. The fact that you are sitting down to meditate at all is in itself an achievement, a success. What you are doing in the rest of the practice is trying to build on that achievement. You have already developed some degree of awareness, some degree of positivity.

7) Periods of intensification (retreats)

A fruitful attitude to meditation is realizing that for your practice to be effective you need to go on retreats from time to time to re-charge your batteries and re-inspire your practice. You can do this by attending all-days, London Insight day retreats, Gaia House and more. You can do this at home yourself if attending somewhere else is not feasible.

KEEPING YOUR PRACTICE ALIVE: SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Ideas to consider are:

Eyes Sitting with eyes open if usually closed or vice versa

Hands Consider their position – palms down; palms up; cupped with tips of thumbs touching (this can be a good bio feedback for either trying too hard (thumbs dig into each other) or falling asleep (thumbs fall apart))

Combining Practices in one Session Doing some brief stretches or walking practice before or after a sitting

Changing your posture If you usually do your practice sitting, how about doing it lying down? (Not the body scan, but going through a similar type of practice as if you were actually ‘sitting’).

Changing your environment For example, opening a door if it’s usually closed; doing it outside (weather permitting!); practising with someone else or in a group. One participant reported on the surprising impact of sitting with the door to the room open rather than closed as usual.

Changing the content of your practice. For example, if you usually work through breath/body/sounds/thoughts/choiceless awareness see what happens if you just focus on one of them or do an alternative practice such as the Mountain, the Lake, Loving Kindness. Whatever you choose do making a clear intention at the start of the practice what it is you are going to do rather than starting with one thing and then changing to another halfway through.

Changing the length of your practice If you sit for a regular length of time perhaps experimenting with extending it slightly – when you reach the point where you would usually finish, seeing if it’s possible to notice the urge to stop, noticing what is being felt in the body, thinking and emotions, and then continuing. Jack Kornfield suggests trying to resist the urge to stop 3 times before concluding your practice.

Changing the time of your practice Routine can be very helpful for maintaining a regular practice but it can be interesting to experiment with doing your practice sometimes at a different time of day to usual. What do you notice?

Taking a break It can be interesting to take a break from formal practice for a specific period of time eg 1-2 weeks and then review how you have felt at not doing a formal practice. However, I would suggest that you do decide a specific date to review the experiment at the beginning to avoid drifting aimlessly. One participant reported that after taking such a break he returned to formal practice with renewed vigour and commitment – sure that this was something he really wanted to do.

Keeping a mindfulness journal Journaling can be a helpful support to your practice giving you a focus and an opportunity to look back and review, noticing patterns that can inform your practice and your daily life. A meditation journal can be as simple as a small notebook and just jotting down a word or two at the end of a practice along with the date, time, type and length of practice.

The spirit you do this is important!

If you do choose to do something different, always making sure you are doing it with a spirit of curiosity and investigation. Perhaps making brief notes at the end of the practice about what you noticed, what was the same, what was different, how you felt etc.

Human beings do crave novelty so there is a balance to be struck between always trying something new because you are bored or want something 'to work' and experimenting. See if you can notice this difference in a felt sense in the body.