

Vipassana Instructions



Beginning

It is helpful to establish mindfulness of body at the beginning of practice. We tend to be less in our bodies and more in our minds and the content of thoughts. When we do formal practice such as sitting, standing, and walking meditation, we first need to learn to be in the body. Awareness of posture is helpful here, as is awareness of breath and of physical sensations. Then we expand our awareness beyond body sensations to awareness of emotions and other aspects of mind.

If you sit on the floor, you may be most comfortable with a *zabuton*¹ or a cushion or blanket that you can place beneath your ankles and feet and knees, so that they are cushioned from the hardness of the floor. A *zafu*² or other cushioning underneath your buttocks will lift your spine. Position the cushion so that you're not sitting on the flat surface and rolling backward, but rather sitting on the forward edge of the cushion so that your pelvis tips under and the spine is naturally lengthening upwards. You may also sit on a chair. It should have a flat surface or even tilt forward slightly. Place the feet slightly apart. Sit with the back erect. Try to sit without leaning back. Whether you sit on a cushion or chair, let the hands rest comfortably on the lap or be cupped one hand inside the other.

At the beginning of the sitting, it may be helpful to take a few deep, long breaths, inhaling, and then slowly exhaling. As you exhale, allow your body to release tension in those areas where you habitually hold it—perhaps the shoulders, chest, stomach, or the back. With each exhalation, feel your body soften and relax.

To bring awareness to your posture, start with the base of the body, noticing the position of the buttocks and knees as a tripod. Bring your attention to this foundation. Notice the position of the legs and the pelvis.

You are not lifting the spine from the top or the bottom. Rather, bring awareness to the erector muscles on either side of the spine; these lengthen the spine gently upward toward the shoulder blades. You may feel as if gentle hands supported erectness by lifting under the edges of the rib cage. Feel a little bit of lifting under the shoulder blades too, lifting without tensing the lower back. Allow the lower back muscles to relax.

As you experience this gentle lifting beneath the rib cage, beneath the shoulder blades, see that there's some space created between the bottom of your rib cage and your pelvis. Feel it lengthen..

Roll the shoulders back; let the tops of the shoulders fall away from the ears. The tops of the shoulders are relaxed. Notice some roundness and curvature where the upper arm meets the shoulder socket. You can have your hands cupped one inside the other on your lap, perhaps the thumbs touching together, or rest them on your thighs if that is more comfortable. Each position has its own benefits. See what fits you. There are no fixed rules.

Tuck in the chin slightly while the throat remains soft and relaxed; gently push backward on the upper lip. The throat and the neck remain relaxed, untensed, as are all the facial muscles. Feel a sense of gentle hands lifting the head, just below and behind the ears, skull softly lifted to erectness.

Relax the skin of the forehead down toward your eyes. Let the eyes be soft, the eyelids gently covering your eyes, unless you're used to meditating with your eyes open. If you are accustomed to practice with the eyes open and are comfortable like that, that's fine. The area behind the eyes is relaxed; the corners of the eyes are smiling.

You may wish to focus the closed eyes on the inner wall of the forehead, the third eye. See it as a blank screen upon which the inner gaze rests.

Invite the facial muscles to soften, relaxing from the inside out. Any tightness in the face, any holding, can release. As you smile and relax into your body, tension can let go.

Let the lower jaw hang open so that the lips separate a bit and any tension in the joints of the jaw can release. Invite a slight smile in the corners of the mouth, the inner smile, Buddha smile, a feeling of lightness in the corners of the mouth.

Smile into the moment and into your body. Be aware of any sensations as you smile into your body. Perhaps sensations are apparent, perhaps not; either way, it's okay.

Bring gentle awareness to the throat, smiling into the mid-area of the throat, the Adam's apple area. Move awareness down into the base of the throat, your jugular notch.

Smile down into the chest, left side of the chest, left lung, right side of the chest, right lung. Smile into the body. Experience it. Establish mindfulness in the present moment, mindfulness of body.

Smile into the heart center, in the area of the physical heart. Touch the heart with awareness.

Smile into the abdomen. Take a deep breath into the chest or the abdomen. Take a deep breath, hold it momentarily, and then slowly exhale. As you do, feel the chest and stomach relax. Do that two or three times: silent deep breaths, each exhale offered with awareness. Relax into your body.

As you smile into the abdomen, let it be soft. Soft belly, Buddha belly. No holding of any tension in the stomach. Let go of fear. Relax the abdomen.

As you breath, you may notice a slight lifting in your sternum, as though there were a string tied to your sternum and it were being lifted up on an angle.

Right now, you are breathing, a natural function of your body. With mindfulness of breathing, you simply turn attention to this process that is happening already. Your body is breathing in, and it's breathing out. *Anapanasati* translates as mindfulness of breathing—simply be aware when you're breathing in, aware when you're breathing out. It's taking one breath at a time. Know when you're breathing in, and know when you're breathing out. Breathing in, be aware of the whole body. Breathing out, be aware of the whole body.

(Some time of practice)

Breathing

Allow a smile in the corners of your eyes and mouth, an inner smile, just an inner feeling of lightness in the corners of your eyes and mouth. Call it Buddha smile. It's a radiance, a lightness.

Focus on the breath as the primary object. Be aware of the breath at the nostrils or wherever it's clearest to you. If your normal breathing is through the mouth, be aware of the breath coming and going through the mouth.

Notice the physical sensation of the breath touching at mouth or nostrils, the coolness of the in-breath, the warm softness of the out-breath.

Know when you're breathing in; know when you're breathing out. Allow the breath to find its own rhythm and flow. You are not controlling it, just observing it, trusting in the body and the breath. Knowing when you're breathing in, and knowing when you're breathing out, your breath becomes the primary object.

Know when you are breathing in. Know when you are breathing out. Know when you are breathing in a long breath. Know when you are breathing out a long breath. Know when you are breathing in a short breath. Know when you are breathing out a short breath.

Sometimes it can be helpful to extend and lengthen the breath at the beginning of a sitting, so that you begin to focus on the entirety of the inhalation and the exhalation, and on the pauses or apertures between the inhalation and the exhalation and between the exhalation and the inhalation.

This pause between the breath is the *now*, just this very moment. Noticing this aperture helps to bring you more deeply into the present moment and concentrates the mind; awareness also brings us deep into the heart center.

Experience your breath as a circle. There is a beginning portion of the inhalation, a middle of the inhalation, and then the later part of the inhalation, a slight pause in the breath, and then the beginning of the exhalation, the middle portion of the exhalation, and the end of the exhalation. A slight pause, and, again, the beginning of the inhalation, and the whole cycle begins once again.

As you allow the breath to become more subtle and natural, you may not sense the entire length of the inhalation or the exhalation. That's okay. Become aware of as much of the breath as possible.

Know when you're breathing in and know when you're breathing out, when you're breathing in a long breath and when you're breathing in a short breath. Breathing in, allow the whole body to be calm and at peace. Breathing out, allow the whole body to be calm and at peace.

As the mind begins to slow down, and becomes more calm and focused, awareness penetrates more deeply. The full length and duration of the breath and the pauses between the exhalation and the inhalation become more noticeable.

(Some time of practice)

Natural Concentration

The breath is the primary object, but concentration is not held here with force. With natural concentration, you focus attention on what is dominant in your experience. If a physical sensation, thought, image, or emotion pulls attention away from the breath, know that your attention has moved from the breath. Know when your attention has moved to physical sensation, thinking, image, or emotion.

People sometimes think, because a strong sensation, thought, image, or emotion draws their attention and they're not with the breath, that they're not meditating, that they're being distracted, or that they're not concentrating. Actually, focusing upon that strong sensation develops deeper concentration, because the mind is holding to an object. That's a very powerful focus. It's a fine opportunity to develop concentration and mindfulness.

Remember, it's not better to be with one object than another, not better to be with the breath than with a physical sensation, image, thought, or emotion. Be with whatever is the predominant experience in the moment.

If you find that an intense sensation keeps pulling your attention away from the breath towards that sensation, turn your attention to it. Lightly note it, creating some space for the experience, placing awareness on the sensation.

If the sensation is unpleasant, watch the tendency to want to push the sensation away, to not want it. Without judgment of the aversion, just notice what arises. Move deeply into the sensation and see how it may change, how it may not be one block of pain, one strong sensation, but little sensations that are arising, changing, and ceasing with varying levels of intensity.

If the sensation is pleasant, watch the tendency to want to hold on to it. Let there be no judgment of the attachment, just notice it arise. How does sensation change as you touch it with merciful, nonjudgmental awareness? What about the attachment to that pleasant sensation?

Are some sensations neutral, calling up neither like nor dislike?

As you create room for a physical sensation, you may find that it moves to another part of the body, from the shoulders down to the back, to a different part of the back, or to the legs. Stay with the experience as long as you are able without doing violence to your body or to yourself. Learn how to work skillfully with meditation and strong bodily sensations.

If tightness in the legs or back or itching, tingling, pain, any physical sensation becomes predominant, turn your attention to the sensation and note it three times: "sensation, sensation, sensation." If you prefer, note it more specifically as, "tingling, tingling, tingling," "tightness, tightness, tightness," or "itching, itching, itching." Don't note it as, "I have pain in my right knee," which snares you into the story of the pain and a self who owns that discomfort. Just observe the sensation and note it in any appropriate way.

As you turn your awareness to the sensation, notice what happens to it. Does it disappear immediately? Does it fade gradually? Does it intensify? Lessen in intensity? Move about? Change into another sensation?

When you find a sensation changing in any way, bring your attention back to the breath as the primary object. Know you have returned to the breath. Know when you're breathing in; know when you're breathing out.

As you're aware of your breathing, thoughts may arise. They may be memories or planning thoughts, judging thoughts, or fantasies. If the thoughts become predominant, if you find yourself more with the thoughts than with the breath, bring your attention to the thought.

Note a thought of the past as, "remembering, remembering, remembering." Watch what happens as you note it. Does it disappear immediately? Does it fade gradually? Does it persist or turn into another thought? What's the nature of it?

Is there a planning thought, a future-oriented thought? Note it as, "planning, planning, planning," or as, "fantasizing, fantasizing, fantasizing." Watch and see how it changes as you watch it.

When the thought is no longer predominant or changes in some way, gently bring the attention back to the breath as the primary object. Know when you're breathing in; know when you're breathing out.

You may have an image that arises in your mind. Some people experience their minds more in images than in thoughts. Treat the image the same way as the thought. If, for example, an image arises of you seeing and talking to someone, and if that experience is strong enough to bring attention away from the breath, turn your attention to that image. Note it as, "seeing, seeing, seeing."

What happens to the image when you touch it with awareness? What is the nature of this object? Does it change when you focus your attention upon it? When the image no longer predominates, bring your attention back to the breath as the primary object.

If emotion arises and predominates, know that you are experiencing that emotion. Note it as, "anger, anger, anger," or perhaps as, "fear, fear, fear," or bliss, joy, jealousy, restlessness, boredom—whatever it may be. Again, note, "anger, anger, anger," not, "I'm feeling angry about what he said," so as not to become entangled in the story, only to know that this mind-body is experiencing anger.

What happens as you note it? Does it strengthen? Fade? Change? Dissolve? When it is no longer predominant, move awareness back to the breath.

Know when you are breathing in. Know when you are breathing out. Know when you are breathing in a long breath. Know when you are breathing out a long breath. Know when you are breathing in a short breath. Know when you are breathing out a short breath. Breathing in and breathing out, be aware of the whole body and mind.

(some time of practice)

Deepening

If the physical sensation, thought, image, or emotion returns and is predominant, again move awareness to it—gentle, nonjudgmental awareness. Let it be choiceless awareness that moves to whatever is predominant in the mind and body.

If the sensation, thought, or emotion has returned and called awareness to it, there is something there that needs to be investigated, not by probing and theorizing but by observing,

by being fully present with that sensation, thought, or feeling and allowing it to be present within the mind-body.

Choiceless awareness. No preference of the breath, the thought, the sensation. Being fully with whatever is. No judgment. Observing.

When sensation, thought, or emotion changes or is no longer predominant, invite awareness back to the breath.

Know when you are breathing in. Know when you are breathing out. Know when you are breathing in a long breath. Know when you are breathing out a long breath. Know when you are breathing in a short breath. Know when you are breathing out a short breath.

See how you relate to sensation, thought, or emotion when it arises. Is there a desire to push it away, not to want it because it's unpleasant? Is there a desire to hold onto it when it is pleasant?

Mindfulness of physical sensations can teach us a lot about our relationship with our body and about our patterns of attachment and aversion. If a pleasant sensation like tingling, moving of energy, or a feeling of lightness in the body becomes predominant, turn your attention to it and note it as, "tingling, tingling, tingling," or "lightness, lightness, lightness." What happens to it as you touch it with awareness? Does it disappear immediately? Does it fade gradually? Does it intensify? Does it change into another sensation?

How do you relate to the situation? Is there a tendency to want to hold onto the sensation because it's pleasant? Is there attachment to the continuation of the sensation in the body? Can you experience the bodily sensation with equanimity, noting it, seeing what happens to it?

What if it is an unpleasant sensation, like pain, tightness, or burning? What happens to it when you touch it with awareness? Does it fade, move, intensify, change? Is there a desire to push it away, to get rid of it? Can you just experience the unpleasant sensation with equanimity, noting it and watching to see what happens to it?

Notice how the primary object changes. First the sensation may be predominant. If it is an unpleasant sensation, aversion may arise, followed by a strong desire to be free of that sensation. There is a shift in experience. The sensation is no longer predominant. The desire energy now holds the attention. See this shift in object and return to the breath. If the aversion or desire comes back, note it as, "wanting, wanting, wanting," and be with it until it changes or dissolves.

Notice the same process with the arising of thought, image, or emotion. Is there a desire to hold onto the pleasant, to get rid of the unpleasant? Can you watch that liking, followed by the next primary object, desire, or attachment—wanting to hold on to? Can you watch aversion, followed by wanting to get rid of? What happens to the attachment or aversion when you watch it? Remember that the sensation or emotion is no longer primary. Let it go gently and be with the mood of mind that has arisen with the object.

If fear arises about what is observed, and if the fear becomes predominant, allow that to become the focus. “Fear, fear, fear.” What happens to the fear as it is watched? Can awareness watch fear without fear? Can there be equanimity even with fear? What is the texture of fear? How does it feel in the body? When it changes or loses its intensity, return again to the breath as primary object.

Know when you are breathing in. Know when you are breathing out. Know when you are breathing in a long breath. Know when you are breathing out a long breath. Know when you are breathing in a short breath. Know when you are breathing out a short breath. Breathing in, be aware of the activities of the mind. Breathing out, be aware of the activities of the mind.

Can there be no judgment of what you’re experiencing? If judgment arises, note, “judgment, judgment, judgment.” Judgment is just a mental formation, a specific kind of thought that also carries a body tension. As you note it, see what happens to it; see its impermanence, its emptiness. Can we watch with equanimity as judgment arises, without judgment of that experience? When judgment is no longer predominant, bring the attention back to the breath as the primary object. Breathing in; breathing out. Breathing in and breathing out.

If the primary object is a physical sensation and is so strong and accompanied by such strong aversion that it no longer feels possible to stay with it, you can move.

Before you move, see the intention to move. The body doesn’t move automatically. The mind must give the impulse for the body to move. If pain leads to intention to move the position of the legs, for instance, be aware of that intention, and then mindfully shift position to ease the discomfort. Be aware of the sensations, aware of the intention, aware of the movement. Meditation continues; there’s no break in the continuity of the awareness. Note the ease also, then return to the breath, breathing in and breathing out, breathing in, pause, breathing out.

As thoughts arise, if they’re strong enough to draw attention away from the breath, treat them the same way as bodily sensations. Sometimes emotion feels intense. You cannot shift positions to escape the pain of thoughts or emotions. Can you watch them and make space for them? What happens to the emotion or thought as you note it? Does it disappear, fade, intensify, lessen in intensity, or turn into another memory or thought pattern? See its impermanent, empty nature. It changes or dissolves in time. When you see a change in some way, and the specific thought or emotion is no longer predominant, bring your attention back to the breath as the primary object.

Remember, that which is aware of a painful emotion like fear or anger is not afraid or angry. Learn to rest in that awareness, not as a way to escape the painful experience, but as a way to create more space with it. When awareness watches fear, see the simultaneous possibility of fear and non-fear. It is not necessary to destroy fear to find the fearless. It is not necessary to destroy anger to find loving-kindness. Both exist together.

It may be helpful to feel the sensation the emotion brings to the body, such as tightness in the belly with anger, and focus there. Soften around that tension, with a kind presence. What happens to the anger when the belly softens?

Know when you are breathing in. Know when you are breathing out. Know when you are breathing in a long breath. Know when you are breathing out a long breath. Know when you are breathing in a short breath. Know when you are breathing out a short breath. Breathing in and out, be aware of the activities of mind.

(some time of practice)

Insight

In insight meditation, we want to see the nature of body and mind and of all the five aggregates—form, feeling, perception, mental formation, and consciousness. Watch them arise and pass away. Watch them change. Notice the interrelationships between them, not thinking about these interrelationships, just noticing, observing the constant movement.

You may have a deeper insight into the impermanence of these aggregates and the emptiness of self therein. Observe body and mind, sensations, thoughts, feelings, perception, consciousness.

You may begin to notice that all phenomena, which are empty of a separate self, arise when conditions are present to lead to their arising. When those conditions cease, the phenomena fade.

Let there be no judgment of what is seen, no preference for the place awareness shines. Be fully with what is, observing.

If preference or judgment is seen, notice that—”preferring, preferring, preferring,” or “judging, judging, judging.” No judgment about the preferring or judging. There is space for it all to float in choiceless awareness.

When sensation, thought, image, or emotion changes or is no longer predominant, move awareness back to the breath.

Objects arising, dissolving, always in motion, impermanent, empty of self.

Consider the lines from the Heart Sutta:

...All dharmas are empty.
They are not born nor annihilated.
They are not defiled nor immaculate.
They do not increase, nor decrease.
So in emptiness, no form, no feeling, no perception,
no mental formation, no consciousness
No knowledge, no attainment, no realization, For
there is nothing to attain....

See the illusion of permanent self dissolve as awareness penetrates and knows the illusion. Moving deeper, beyond the small self, beyond aversion and attachment, beyond ignorance.

Find space for all experience to float in that heart we all share. Rest in the vehicle of choiceless awareness.

Become aware of awareness itself. See objects arise out of spaciousness and dissolve back in to spaciousness. Become aware of the nature of that which sees, that which knows. Gradually, you will rest in the Unconditioned itself, seeing conditioned phenomena come and go like clouds through an empty sky.

Know when you are breathing in. Know when you are breathing out. Know when you are breathing in a long breath. Know when you are breathing out a long breath. Know when you are breathing in a short breath. Know when you are breathing out a short breath. Breathing in and out, observing the impermanent nature of all dharmas. Breathing in and out, observing the fading of all dharmas. Breathing in and out and contemplating letting go.

Grasp at nothing. Cling to nothing. Push away nothing in your experience. Be present. Be mindful. Be aware.

It is a gentle, timeless process. Just watching it all unfold. Choiceless awareness. All experience floating in the open heart.

Vipassana Instructions from Barbara Brodsky and John Orr

¹ Zabuton: a flat cushion that goes under the body and feet.

² Zafu: a round support cushion.