

Advice on Meditation

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Students often have difficulties with simple (a.k.a. “concentration”) meditation: They report being unable to keep attention on the breath for any extended period of time. The mind always wanders away!

First off, this is entirely NORMAL. You are pre-programed to have a wandering mind, and it would be surprising if a beginner could maintain focus for long periods. Be kind to yourself!

Second, it is good that you are aware of your restless mind. That is so, given the psychological evidence that mind-wandering cuts significantly into your sense of well-being. (Remember the Laurie Santos video that we saw in class.) So applaud yourself for noticing—it is the first step.

Third, you may not believe me...but there’s no such thing as failure. Really. Think of it this way: When you are attempting to meditate, your mind is doing something VERY DIFFERENT than what it ordinarily does. It *is* keeping a watch on itself, in a way that is unlike the usual, unchecked mind-wandering. After all, you have a standing *intention* to notice when your mind wanders, and you often *succeed* in catching yourself. That puts your brain in a significantly different state than usual. So you ARE succeeding!

Fourth, here is the most important point for the stage you’re currently at: It is *very* easy to fall into the trap of trying to *force* yourself to maintain focus. In that case, meditating becomes tinged with a kind of *tension*, associated with pushing yourself to accomplish something. For this reason, some meditators say that so-called “concentration meditation” is actually *not* a good type of meditation—such tension is *quite opposed* to the purpose.

How do you avoid falling into the trap? The short answer is “just relax!” But admittedly, that isn’t very helpful. The longer answer is that this too resolves with time and practice. Even so, I once had an experience that was fairly instructive on this point...

A few years ago, I received some very upsetting news, and so I was (naturally) very upset. Instinctually, I started focusing on the breath, as a way to calm down. And on that occasion, it worked *dramatically well*. (That is so, even though I did it only for a few minutes, and there was some mind-wandering besides.) Afterward, it struck me that the experience was really just a more vivid illustration of what usually goes on in meditation.

The fact is that *very often* some part of your mind is upset about something. Maybe it is a relatively small part, but often there is *some* part of you which is sad, worried about the future, angry or frustrated, etc. And if you’re like me, much of the time you are not even *aware* that you’re carrying around a feeling of “upset.” But if it’s there, it can be a drag on you. Meditation is an opportunity to calm that part of you down.

Accordingly, we can think of the breath as *something to hold onto*, a kind of “anchor” you can grasp to help still the mind. Again, you may not have recognized a need to settle down—nonetheless, focusing on the breath will often end up being a *comfort*, a fixed point to soothe your agitated psyche. (And this is quite different from “focusing on the breath” as a *task* which you *force yourself* to do.)

The breath can be seen in other, beneficial ways. Different conceptions may come and go, as you maintain a watch on the breath. Although for me, the most enjoyable state is when the mind is completely still, where even awareness of the breath is extinguished.

Many issues with simple meditation also arise with Vipassana meditation. To be clear, the two kinds of meditation are different: Rather than quieting the mind, Vipassana is about *listening attentively* to your own mind, to perceive what emotions, thoughts, etc., are present in the background (or even in the foreground). Yet here too, it is easy to stray from this activity, and fall into distraction. But again:

-Be kind to yourself!

-Applaud yourself for noticing your wandering mind.

-See that you *are* succeeding in putting your brain in a different state than is usual.

Also, I like to see Vipassana as a process of recovery—not just in the sense of healing, but also in the sense of regaining your “center.” This orientation helps give the meditation a positive feel. On such “recovery,” I am reminded of a quotation from the secular Buddhist Sam Harris:

“[This is] the most important thing I have ever been explicitly taught...That which is aware of sadness is not sad. That which is aware of fear is not fearful.” (*Waking Up*, p. 137)

Sometimes during Vipassana, it is as if I am floating above a lake of emotions and thoughts. I then watch the negative bits drift away—not with bitterness or resentment, but just with interested awareness.

Ultimately, you might decide that these styles of meditation are not for you. In that case, I would still encourage you to try out other types of meditation. Buddhists often practice *metta* or “loving-kindness” meditation, and we haven’t talked about that in class. Also, some of my favorite kinds are not in the Buddhist tradition at all, but rather in the Vedic or Hindu tradition. (If you are open-minded enough, I might recommend that you experiment with “Kundalini yoga.”)

Final thought. In practicing meditation, I often am reminded of the following passage from the *Tao-te Ching*. (This is a book from neither the Hindu nor Buddhist tradition, but rather from the Taoist tradition.)

Walking around, we stop
for music, for food.
But if you taste the Tao
It is flat, insipid.
It looks like nothing much.
It sounds like nothing much.
And yet you can’t get enough of it.

(from *Tao-te Ching* #35, translated by U.K. Le Guin)