

GUIDE
LEARNING
TO
MEDITATE

About Juniper

Juniper is an extension of a long Indo-Tibetan Buddhist lineage, illuminating its wisdom and practices in modern culture. We offer a path that unfolds a spiritual dimension to our lives, infusing us with serenity, insight, and concern for others and unlocking our potential to become a strong, positive force in the world. Please visit our Web site to join our e-mail list or contact or visit us at our Redwood City, California, teaching and meditation center.

Web Site

www.juniperpath.org

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What Is Meditation?

Meditation is the foundation of training the mind. It comprises a rich collection of practices that cultivate focus, stability, insight, and awareness. We can think of meditation as exercise for the mind. Just as physical exercise strengthens the body, meditation strengthens the mind. Similarly, just as reading about the benefits of physical exercise will not make us physically fit, intellectual knowledge about meditation will not make us inwardly fit. Meditating, and putting what we gain in meditation to work, is the springboard for our inner journey.

Meditation is a space that we carve out each day to turn inward. It is important to follow meditation instructions that are clear and precise, but we do not have to be too rigid. We can develop a way of practicing that suits our own style and personality. The length, frequency, and objects of meditation, for example, might vary from one person to another and will evolve over time as we gain experience.

At Juniper we practice two principle types of meditation: concentration meditation and analytical meditation. In concentration meditation, we hold the mind on an object, such as the breath or a visualized image, building up our capacity to focus and overcome inner agitation and lethargy. In analytical meditation, we use the mind's capacity for contemplation and reason to raise our awareness of different topics so that they take hold within us at a deep level. Both of these meditations use the same basic structure, which we will present in this guide, using concentration meditation to illustrate the concepts. In a subsequent guide, we will elaborate upon analytical meditation.

Often, when we first try meditation of any kind, we encounter the mind's state of agitation head-on. After just a few seconds the mind

wanders. We bring it back and it wanders again. Over and over it drifts, jumping from one thought to another. Or we may find ourselves drowsy or falling asleep, unable to concentrate on anything at all. The mind oscillates between excitement and lethargy, like a little dog that is either barking excitedly or sleeping. As we work on meditation, however, we develop more capacity to bring these inner swings under control and to make the mind more stable and serene. Eventually, we find that this healthier state of mind is not something we experience only during meditation; it will begin to influence all our endeavors, bringing to everything we do a more patient, calm, and serene inner state.

Meditation is a learned skill, something in which we build competence over time. Proficiency in meditation is acquired through repeated effort. The best way to develop the mind is through gradual change and refinement, like dripping water that slowly smoothes jagged rock. Meditation is the water, gradually refining and polishing the mind. Therefore, regular practice is more important than the length of the practice; it is better to have a meditation session for even a few minutes daily than to have longer sessions less frequently.

The basic structure of meditation has three aspects:

- preparation
- setting the object
- bringing the mind back

If we understand these aspects, we will be on our way to establishing a meditation practice.

Three Aspects of Meditation

The three aspects of meditation are preparation, setting the object, and bringing the mind back.

PREPARATION

When we do physical exercise, we are accustomed to making preparations. We must decide when to exercise (morning, lunch, evening, or weekends), make sure we are physically ready (wear the right clothes and ensure the stomach is not too full), and decide where to exercise (home, gym, or outdoors). Meditation is similar in that we need to take some simple steps to prepare. It is better to think of the preparation as part of the meditation itself, because the process of preparation helps us to calm down and turn inward. Preparing to meditate has three elements: time, place, and posture.

Time

It is best to pick a set time to meditate, even for five minutes. Possibilities include when we wake up, after breakfast, before dinner, before we go to bed, or any other convenient time. The time of day itself does not matter as much as our commitment to it. We can, of course, change the time or alter it according to our schedule, but it is good to have in mind a set time. It is also good to make it a daily endeavor. Five minutes a day is better than an hour on the weekends. It is fine if we miss a day here and there but we recommend a commitment to a daily meditation practice at a particular time. If you wish, it is often helpful to use a countdown timer to set a specific time period for your meditation session. Perhaps begin with five minutes.

Place

Surprisingly, it can be challenging to find a good place to meditate. The difficulty of finding a clean, quiet place to sit for a short time is perhaps testimony to the amount of distraction in our lives and the need to meditate. It is not easy to remove ourselves from phones, TV, and other distractions, so we need to put a little effort into it. We recommend picking one place to meditate and sticking to it—any clean and reasonably quiet place where you can sit for a little while undisturbed. Of course, if you are traveling, then you could find any place that works while you are away (the beach or the mountains, for example, can be wonderful places to meditate).

Posture

It is important to pay attention to our posture when we meditate. This has a dual effect. First, we can meditate more comfortably and for longer periods when we have good posture. Second, keeping the body in a good posture helps our inner energy and vitality to flow better. Because we are all physically different, there is no formula for how to sit correctly during meditation. We have to experiment until we find what works. Consider this effort part of the meditation itself. As you grow accustomed to meditation, it is likely that your posture will evolve. There are several aspects of meditation posture to consider.

- *Floor or chair:* We recommend sitting upright on the floor or in a chair. We do not recommend lying down because it is too easy to fall asleep. If your legs can handle it, we suggest trying to sit on the floor; otherwise, a chair is fine.
- *Legs:* If you are on the floor, you can cross your legs in the lotus, half-lotus, or ordinary cross-legged position. Any comfortable cross-legged position will work as long as you can sustain it for a little while. Because we are unaccustomed to sitting cross-legged, we generally need one or more cushions to sit on, and sometimes a small cushion under each knee. The goal is to raise the hips and buttocks so the knees rest firmly on the floor. Any reasonably firm cushions will do.

- *Spine and shoulders:* Try to keep the spine erect. If it slouches as you meditate, straighten it again. Keep the shoulders relaxed, not tight or hunched up.
- *Eyes:* It is best not to have the eyes fully open, because there are too many distractions, nor fully closed, because this makes it easier to fall asleep. If you can, close the eyes almost all the way, allowing in just a sliver of light.
- *Hands:* We recommend placing the hands in your lap, palms up, with the right palm resting gently in the left, and the ends of the thumbs gently touching.

It is best not to be too rigid in finding the right posture. You can have a great meditation without twisting the legs into uncomfortable positions. Experiment to see what works.

SETTING THE OBJECT

The second aspect of meditation is setting the object. The object of meditation is what we focus our mind upon during the meditation. In meditation we do not “space out” or allow the mind to drift. Meditation always involves an object. We want to anchor the mind on an object and keep it there, so it is important to decide ahead of time what the object of our meditation will be.

There are many possible objects for concentration meditation, including physical objects such as the breath or mental objects such as a visualized image. We recommend beginning with the breath and adding additional objects later. To set the object, we have to decide exactly how and where we will focus on the breath. Our recommendation is to breathe in your normal pattern, very naturally. Then pick one spot where you feel the breath. One possibility is the abdomen, where the belly moves in and out. Another possibility is the tips of the nostrils, where you can feel the breath coming in and out. The important point is to make a clear commitment to that location. At the beginning of your meditation, take a few breaths to relax, then focus

the mind on your object of meditation. Bring your attention to it and try to keep it there.

BRINGING THE MIND BACK

The third aspect of meditation is bringing the mind back. After we start to meditate, it will not take long for the mind to wander. Maybe a few seconds. This is normal. The mind is active, and the first thing meditation does is remind us of that. Observe the distraction, trying not to become wrapped up in it, and gently bring your attention back to the object of meditation—in this case, the breath.

For a great many individuals, this is easier said than done. It is as if our minds have minds of their own. We want to focus the mind in one direction but it is going headlong in another. Our minds may be excited and distracted, focusing on the issues or emotions of the day, or our minds may be lethargic, taking the opportunity to drift off sleepily. This is all normal. This is why we recommend meditating in short sessions, such as five minutes, especially at the outset. Making a habit of meditation will help build the capacity to stay focused on the object. Just bring the mind back to the breath as well as you can.

Sometimes it helps to count the breath as you focus on it. This provides an additional anchor. Counting each in-and-out breath as one, count down from twenty to one, repeating the cycle when you are finished. If your mind drifts from focusing on your breath before you make it all the way down to one, start again from twenty.

These, then are the three aspects of meditation: preparation, setting the object and bringing the mind back. As your practice develops you can expand it in a number of ways. For example, you can lengthen the time of your meditation session, count down from a higher number, or not count at all and just focus on the breath.

A Healthy Approach

As you begin a meditation practice, following a few basic guidelines will cultivate a healthy approach:

- be patient
- don't compare
- enjoy simplicity
- make it a habit
- relax

Be patient

Proficiency in meditation is a gradual process, so if we are looking for immediate results we might become frustrated. We mentioned earlier how meditation works like water dripping onto a jagged rock. We cannot discern the effect of each drop, but over time the rock becomes smooth and beautiful. Think of each moment of effort—preparation, setting the object, bringing the mind back—as one drop. Results will come from accumulating a steady stream of drops, not from impatiently pouring lots of water on the rock trying to make it smooth.

Don't compare

Meditation is not about performance. It is about you and your mind. We all start at different places and we all progress in different ways. We can easily be fooled by one person who looks like a great meditator, another who eloquently articulates nuances of Buddhist philosophy, or another who can barely do either. These are merely outer signs that tell us little about one's inner state. Thus, it can be very misleading to judge or compare oneself with others. Meditation is a time to turn off the inner pressures that say you have

to be one thing or another. You may feel that your meditation is progressing slowly or not at all, or you may find some meditations are better than others, but inward changes still may be taking place.

Enjoy simplicity

Do not be in a hurry to make your meditation practice longer or more complicated. There are many types of meditation, some simple and some involving extensive visualizations. It is tempting to want to do them all, and tempting to think that the more complex your meditation, the more advanced your practice. However, this is a false assumption. Sometimes the simplest meditations can be the most potent, and one's capacity to do more complex meditations may not be a reflection of inner growth or development but simply a reflection of the desire to achieve. We recommend sticking with the simple for a while, even longer than you think necessary. Even when you do extend your practice, come back to the simple every now and again.

Make it a habit

The best way to see results is by making your meditation a regular habit. We recommend a daily meditation practice, even for a few minutes. If you aim for a daily practice, there is a higher chance that meditation will become a healthy habit in your life. By having a daily practice, you will tend to engage in a regular practice even if you miss a day here and there.

Relax

Above all, relax. In our attainment-oriented culture, meditation should be a respite from the pressures of performance. Go easy on yourself. Be happy that you are making space to meditate. Enjoy the connection with a spiritual lineage of masters and adepts. Allow their efforts and these teachings to energize you. Try to stay content and relaxed as you embark on this journey.

Summary

THREE ASPECTS OF MEDITATION

Preparation

Time. Commit to a fixed daily time to meditate. If you wish, use a countdown timer to set a specific time period for your meditation session. Perhaps begin with five minutes.

Place. Commit to one place to meditate that is quiet and where you will be uninterrupted.

Posture. Either sit cross-legged on the floor, with cushions for support, or sit in a chair. Keep your spine erect, shoulders relaxed, and hands in your lap, palms up, with the right hand resting on the left and thumbs touching. Close your eyes almost all the way, allowing in a sliver of light.

Setting the Object

Use your breath as the object of meditation. Breathe naturally and focus on the flow of your breath in the abdomen or at the tips of the nostrils.

Bringing the Mind Back

As your mind wanders from the object of meditation, gently bring it back to restore your focus. If you wish, count down from twenty to one, counting each in-and-out breath as one. Start again when you are finished or if your mind drifts from your breath. When the time is up, take a deep breath and bring the session to an end.

WAYS TO EXPAND THIS PRACTICE

- Lengthen the time of the session
- Count down from a higher number
- Stop counting and just focus on the breath

A HEALTHY APPROACH

- Be patient
- Don't compare
- Enjoy simplicity
- Make it a habit
- Relax