

The Practice of Presence

This practice is core to the other appreciative attending practices, as presence creates the capacity for the other practices to have an effect.

There are many different attending practices. Some practices build up concentration on one focus of attention, most commonly the breath. Others focus more on having a wider field of awareness of sights, sounds, other sensations, thoughts, and feelings. In this practice, you will work on anchoring attention on your breath while continuing to note other mental experiences in your peripheral awareness. You will then practice what is called “choiceless awareness,” where you let go of a focus of attention and let be whatever arises in awareness.

This practice will gradually transform your experience. Appreciation of the sacred nature of things will naturally arise. With practice, you will experience more peace, ease, insight, clarity, and freedom to act wisely with love. While this awakening practice will require intentional repeated efforts, it will become more of a natural reflex with time.

The choiceless awareness part of this practice is a practice of what you might call “being awareness.” There is an open, spacious attending to all that arises, without an effort to control. You will experience a freeing sense of Life just happening, with a gradual easing of a constricting sense of self that crowds out love. You will then experience yourself to be a love-infused part of the sacred flow of Life.

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At first, your mind will be very busy. If your mind does not settle, that's perfectly OK. Just try to notice brief moments of stillness between the thoughts. Note the awareness of all this thinking.

As you engage in this practice, try to notice the experience of non-doing—a sense that you are just having an awareness of life flowing within and around you. This will gradually dissolve away the illusory sense of self.

1. Find a position that is comfortable. Upright, relaxed, alert, balanced between relaxation and energy. You can sit on a chair or on a cushion. You can even lie down if you are not sleepy. You can close your eyes, but I recommend you keep them open, because you want to have this be similar to when you are going about your day.
2. Begin with sincerity of intention. Make an intention to attend as best you can to this moment—the now—for the period of this practice.
3. Take a few deep breaths. Inhale deeply and slowly. Exhale slowly, consciously. Let go of tension with the outbreath.
4. Let the mind settle on the breath. Notice the sensation of air going in and out of the nostrils. Note the sensation of movement of the chest and belly.
5. As you attend to the breath, note how the mind wanders. This is normal. When this happens, kindly and gently return your attention back to your breath.
6. While attending to the breath, also begin to attend to the senses of the body—feet, legs, pelvis, abdomen, chest, hands, arms, neck, head, face.

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7. Let tension in the body ease. Ease your shoulders. Soften the hands. Soften the jaw, letting it drop open very slightly. Feel the life inside the hands and the rest of the body. Let sensations be received in awareness.
8. While continuing to attend to the breath, also note sights and sounds in your background awareness. If there are smells and tastes, note these too in your background awareness while you continue to attend to your breath. Do this for a period of time.
9. As sensations, thoughts, images, memories, feelings, and urges arise, note them. If you wish, you can silently say to yourself, “thought,” or “image,” or “memory,” or “urge.” If a feeling arises, you can note that as well. If there is fear, note “fear.” If there is boredom, note “boredom.” If restlessness arises, note “restlessness.” If there is calm, you can note calm. Keep returning attention to the breath after you note these experiences.
10. After some time, see if you can just attend to the totality of your experience. Attend to this whole moment, with the sensations of the body, the sights, the sounds, the feelings, the thoughts, the images, and the urges. See if you can sense all of it. I call this “whole moment awareness.”
11. Be aware of all these different experiences as they come and go. Let them come, let them be, and let them go. Note the constantly changing flow of experience.
12. After some time attending to this whole moment, sense in the background Awareness Itself. Make a gentle effort to be aware of experience and aware of Awareness at the same time. As you do this, you will note the waterfall of ever-changing experience arising in Awareness. When you are attending in this way, you are present.

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13. Stay present by anchoring awareness in the breath. As the mind wanders, keep coming back to the breath, starting over, again and again.
14. Now, after some time with this, practice letting go of any directing of attention at all. Rest in presence itself. See if you can just be aware. Now are you attending to awareness and all experience without a focus of attention. Let there be an allowing, letting the flow of Life be just as it is.
15. Let go and relax with the river of experience. Sense the underlying stillness out of which all the movements of sensations arise.
16. When attention gets caught up in thought—as it will over and over—gently come back to an awareness of Awareness and of the continuous flow of the whole moment. Listen to and feel the life of the moment. Continue to note the movement of the breath, still aware of other experiences as they arise and fall away.
17. Sense Life as a sacred force living through you.
18. Without trying to control anything and without focusing attention on any one thing, experience everything as just happening. Experience Life happening. Note if there is a falling away of a sense of self. Continue to be in the flow of Life. See if you can sense a natural, empty, spacious, self-less, bare awareness. If you can, sense how this bare, self-less Awareness is infused with love.
19. Resting in bare, spacious awareness, experience the freedom of non-doing. Note the experience of joy, satisfaction, peace, and contentment of Life living through you.

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20. When you are ready, go about your day. As you do so, bring this vast, spacious, still, loving awareness into the movements of your day. Practice being still while still moving.

Don't be discouraged if you don't experience enlightenment in the first five minutes of this practice. Don't be discouraged if your wild mind, like mine, bounces all over the place and you find you can barely experience any stillness, spaciousness, or presence at all. That is normal. The practice is to keep coming back to presence, 10,000 times a day, even if just for a second, for the rest of your life. Over time, this practice will erode the painful, constricting experiences of being lost in thought and caught up in emotions. This practice will ultimately bear the fruits of peace, clarity, and wisdom.

Since reverence arises out of stillness, this presence practice is the foundation for other meditative/visualization practices.

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