Session 1: Introduction

Why Meditate? & What is Mindfulness?

Meditation and mindfulness practice are powerful tools you can use to create peace and calm in your life. Meditation will help you see things clearly, reduce your stress levels, and live your life fully awake and alive. Practicing mindfulness will help you control habitual impulses and reactions that might lead to further problems. These practices are the foundation of the Peacemaker Training Path.

Meditation is training your mind to be peaceful. Consider training your mind as you would your muscles. Both take time and practice, and sometimes aren’t easy. If you grip something, the muscles in your hand and arm tense. If you continue to grip, your entire body tenses. Relax your hand and the tension leaves. Similarly, your mind might grab at thoughts and worries. The longer you grip onto your thoughts and stories and make them into ‘Big Deals,’ the more tense and agitated your mind will become. Meditation will help you relax that tendency and allow you to experience your life from a centered, peaceful place.

Meditation is taught to the Los Angeles Lakers and the Chicago Bulls as part of their training. Coaches have found that meditation helps players be more centered, focused, and aware—qualities which result in their game being much more effective.

Meditation and mindfulness practice will help you on the path to inner freedom. They will allow you to catch the moments where you have the choice and freedom to not react mindlessly. Instead, you will be able to choose to act or not act from a strong, clear and centered place.

“Peace does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work.

Peace means to be in the midst of all those things and still be calm in your heart.”

~ Marcel Morin
Thinking …Thinking…Thinking …

In every moment of the day, most likely your mind is thinking, thinking, thinking. Thoughts come and go; racing around your head endlessly. Sometimes one small anxious thought will capture all of your attention and you are off and running, making a huge, disturbing story out of it. You might believe this story is absolute reality, even though it began with just a simple thought that may or may not be based on reality.

Most of us race through life endlessly reacting to our thoughts and building our lives around them. Our minds are rarely calm and quiet. Meditation is a tool you can use to calm your mind and create space around your thoughts and stories, so that your thoughts are clear and useful. Meditation is not a way to become thoughtless—thoughts are a necessary and natural part of being human. It’s all the anxious stories, confusion, and worries you sometimes create from your thoughts that turn into the problem. Meditation can help you with this, by creating more clarity in your thinking.

What did you have for breakfast two Thursdays ago? You might find it hard to remember unless you eat the same thing every day. But even if you could remember, you most likely wouldn’t remember the specifics. For example, the breakfast may have been cold or under cooked, and you don’t remember those details. Sometimes many of us take our thoughts of the past to be reality, when in fact, memory is fuzzy and colored with interpretations. On the other hand, do you ever think about the future, and worry about a reality that hasn’t happened, wondering, “What will happen to me?” But you have no way of knowing what the future will be, any more than you can be sure of remembering the past exactly as it was. The only thing you can know for certain is the present moment, which is your window into reality. Meditation will help you see and experience your life as it really is, with clarity and focus.

“You are so impulsive & out of control!”

Have you ever heard that? Being impulsive means you’re acting so fast you don’t have time to consider the results of what you’re doing. Meditation is a powerful tool that will help you slow down so that you have space in your head to think before you jump into action.
Meditation: What It Is… & What It Isn’t…

**Meditation is…**
- a way to transform your life and find peace
- a way to deal effectively with stress and tension
- a tool you can use anywhere, anytime… in any situation

**Meditation is NOT…**
- a quick fix
- a way to become thoughtless or a brain dead zombie

**Stress & Relaxation**
When you meditate, you will use your breath to relax. Your breath can be the most powerful and direct route to relaxation. When you are tense or stressed, have you ever noticed that your breath is fast and shallow and your muscles are tight?

By learning to meditate, you will become aware of how you are breathing, and you will learn how to achieve deep and calm relaxation. Your breath will slow down and your muscles will relax. Simply by breathing deeply and evenly, you will become quieter and calmer. Your breath is a tool that you can use to create peace inside yourself.

You will be exploring many different types of meditation in this workbook—most will involve working with the breath in different ways to achieve relaxation and clarity.

**Try this now:**
Stop. Shut your eyes. Take four deep, slow breaths…
… What happened?

“Meditation is the language of the soul.”
~ David McKay, author

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How to Practice Meditation . . .

First you will explore formal meditation, sometimes called “sitting practice.” The first thing you will work on is your meditation posture.

The Six Points of Good Posture

1. **Seat:** Sit comfortably on the floor or on a chair. Have a strong sense of being solidly on the earth. Your posture is regal, alert and awake (as opposed to slumping). If you sit cross legged, your knees shouldn’t be higher than your hips (use a folded blanket or pillow to raise your seat if necessary).

2. **Legs:** Cross your legs comfortably at the ankles. If you are in a chair, don’t cross your legs; instead plant them firmly on the floor, hip width apart.

3. **Arms:** Let your arms hang loosely from relaxed shoulders. Rest your hands comfortably on your thighs.

4. **Strong Back/Soft Front:** Your torso is upright and dignified as if you are a king or queen on a throne with your spine straight. Your back feels strong and your chest is soft and open.

5. **Eyes:** Your eyes can be open or shut. If they are open, gaze softly downward about three to four feet in front of you.

6. **Mouth:** Relax your face and jaw. Open your mouth slightly as if saying “Ah.” Place your tongue on the roof of your mouth.

If you sit cross legged and your legs cramp, it is okay to stretch them out or briefly bring your knees up. Not everyone can sit cross legged, so it’s fine to use a chair or sit on the side of a bed; just make sure to have your feet firmly planted on the floor and your back straight. Lying down is also an option (although you might fall asleep if you get very relaxed . . . if so . . . enjoy your moment of rest!).

“It’s not so much what happens—as it is how we are with ourselves regardless of what happens—that makes the difference in our lives.”

~ Cheri Huber, zen teacher

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Your Breath

Put your attention on your breath. Take a few deep breaths, exhaling fully. Let your breath settle into its natural rhythm.

Sit still and keep your focus on your breath. When your attention wanders, bring it back to the breath again…and again…and again.

You might bring your attention back to the breath 1,000 times—that is the practice of meditation—constantly bringing your mind back to the peace and simplicity of the present moment, over and over.

Why put attention on your breath? Because the breath is a portable tool that is always with you. You can focus on your breath any time, in any situation, and use it to calm yourself. Practicing sitting meditation in a more focused, “formal” way will help train you so that when you need to calm down, you will remember to use the breath as a tool.

Labeling Thoughts

When you notice your mind racing with thoughts, emotions, or sensations, simply return to your breath and continue putting your attention on the breath coming in and out of either your nose or mouth.

You don’t have to push away your thoughts—the point is not to get rid of thoughts and be thoughtless—the point is to simply not make a big deal out of your thoughts. You are learning to take a “No Big Deal” approach to them by simply returning your focus to your breath.

Labeling is one way to work with thoughts. When thoughts arise—and when you notice you are thinking—simply say to yourself (silently) “Thinking.” Then return to the breath.

Labeling is not meant to get rid of thoughts or sensations. It is a training tool that will show you what these thoughts really are—simply thoughts—nothing more, nothing less. Many times we get carried away with our thoughts and stories. The labeling tool will help you not get so carried away.

“There can only be one state of mind as you approach any profound test; total concentration, a spirit of togetherness, and strength.”

~ Pat Riley, L.A. Lakers coach
Labeling is done with a light touch—we aren’t beating ourselves up by screaming or shouting internally, “THINKING!!” over and over! Just gently say, “Thinking” when you notice you are caught up in your thoughts—and return to focusing on your breath.

So-called “good” and “bad” thoughts are all the same—you could be having a thought about hitting someone or about playing with a puppy—all are just thoughts. Simply label them “Thinking” and return to your breath. Train your mind like this and you will soon realize that you don’t need to act on every thought that appears. You’ll see that thoughts come and go and you don’t need to latch on to them or make a big deal out of them. Thoughts are natural. Simply let them come and go.

“Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.”

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson, poet
Practice Tips

Willingness

Be willing to try. You will only know if meditation works if you give it a shot. Start slow, 5 or 10 minutes a day. Notice if you are calmer, more centered, or less angry.

Why?

Take a moment—just a few seconds before you meditate—to ask yourself why you want to meditate. Do you want less stress? To be more calm? To be less reactive? To be less angry? To sleep better? Whatever it is—just take a few seconds to reflect on “Why?”

Resistance

If you find you are resistant to practice, well—that’s normal! Consider your resistance as just another thought—don’t let it dominate your life. Let it go. Meditation is mind training; it takes work, and leaping over resistance is part of the work.

Doing it as a “Chore”

Try to avoid ‘should-ing’ yourself into meditation or making it into something you dread doing because you ‘Must.’ Meditation is not something you should do—it is something that will transform your life in many positive ways if you choose to practice it. The choice is yours.

How Long?

Meditate for as long as you feel comfortable, even if it is only five minutes a day. If you feel you are forcing yourself to practice, you may begin to dread it, and then stop doing it. As you practice more and see that it helps—you will find yourself wanting to do it longer.

I’m Too Emotional To Sit Still . . .

When you are agitated or emotional, don’t avoid practice. It may seem hard, but these are the times meditation can really help. Don’t miss the opportunity to test this yourself and see if it helps.

“All too often people come to meditation in the hope of extraordinary results, like visions, lights, or some supernatural miracle.

When no such thing occurs, they feel extremely disappointed.

But the real miracle of meditation is more ordinary and much more useful…”

~ Sogyal Rinpoche, Tibetan spiritual teacher
N.B.D. (no big deal)

Resistance, agitation, boredom, sleepiness, dreams, fantasies, schemes, plans, and emotions (such as anger, depression or anxiety) are normal things that come up during meditation. Your mind slows down when you meditate. Sometimes old or buried pain can surface when the ‘noise’ of daily thinking quiets. When this occurs, try to take a “touch & go” attitude toward these feelings without resisting them or getting totally swept away by them. Feel them fully, then let them go and return to your breath. Resisting them or getting lost in the feelings will only make them a bigger deal. Take a “N.B.D.” (no big deal) attitude about feelings that arise—experience them fully, let go and return to the breath.

Do I Need a Special Cushion or a Quiet Place To Practice?

Sometimes it is suggested you use a meditation cushion and sit in a quiet place. Yes, these are supportive conditions for meditation, but life doesn’t always work like that. A folded blanket or pillow can be just as helpful as a meditation cushion. You can also sit on a chair or on the side of your bed. If you find you are bothered by noise, try using the sounds that occur as the focus of your meditation and see what happens. Let sound happen without commenting on it. Simply listen. You will work with a specific sound meditation later in this workbook. (See Session 4)

“Whether we sit with our arms folded this way and our legs crossed that way is of little consequence. But it is extremely important to check and see if whatever meditation we do is an actual remedy for our suffering.”

~ Lama Thubten Yeshe
What is Mindfulness Practice?

Mindfulness involves paying attention to whatever is going on right now. Right now you are reading this sentence. Does your mind wander as you read? You turned the page a second ago—can you remember what you just read there? Being able to stay focused and present is the practice of mindfulness.

You might spend your time so absorbed in thoughts, fantasies, schemes, plans, worries, etc.—that you miss what is actually happening in your life. Minutes, hours, days, weeks or even years can pass, and you are so distracted that your life slips by without you even knowing it.

Mindfulness practice will train you to wake up to your life, to see it as it really is and appreciate it. It will help you relax and be more open, alert, focused, and clearheaded. When you develop the skill of mindfulness, you will make choices and decisions from a place of calm and clarity, rather than reactivity, fear, or impulse.

**Witness Quality of Mindfulness**

Mindfulness means you are not completely absorbed or lost in what is happening with you or around you. Some part of your mind remains a neutral observer or witness—aware, in an objective way, of what is going on.

For instance, right now I am typing at my computer; I know at the same time I am sitting in front of my desk, hearing the conversation from a TV program, feeling hungry, aware of noises from the street outside and so on. I am mindful, clearly aware of the various things happening around me without getting caught by any one thing. I am able to take in whatever is happening with awareness and interest.

The relaxation, presence, and clarity you achieve through meditation and mindfulness practice will put you in charge of your life. You have a choice—either take charge of your life through practicing mindfulness, or let random thoughts, impulses, fear, and reactivity run your life.

What choice will you make?

“The moment one gives close attention to any thing, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.”

~ Henry Miller, writer
Mindfulness 24x7: Meditation-in-Action

Here are some additional ways to work on developing mindfulness:

- Make a habit of “checking in” and witnessing the thoughts that pop up throughout your day. Just stop and notice that you are thinking before you act. If you recognize that your thoughts are not peaceful—stop, look at the thought like a witness and take a few deep breaths. Train your mind to see what kind of thoughts lead to different kinds of actions. The more you do this, the more you will realize the cause and effect reality of what happens when you impulsively act on your thoughts. This will also help you connect with the fact that you do have choice.

- If you are standing in a line waiting, use this time for meditation-in-action by simply focusing on your breath. Just stop, take a deep breath, and focus on the present moment. These ordinary ‘gaps’ will help grow your discipline and will help relax you in the moment.

- Develop a habit to stop several times a day and check for physical tension. Scan your body for tense areas. Silently tell the tense muscle to relax. Take a few deep breaths as you do this.

- During the day, notice how you eat food, how fast or slow you walk, how fast you talk, how you hold your body, etc. Every time you bring your attention to what you are doing in the present moment, your mindfulness and awareness will grow.

It’s been proven through many research studies that practicing mindfulness creates more peace and less tension. Try it!

**General Mindfulness/Awareness Practice**

1. First focus attention outside yourself…”I am aware of …”

2. Then focus on your own body and your physical sensations…”I am warm, my stomach hurts, my neck is tense, etc.”

3. Then relax, let go and return to whatever you are doing.
Walking…

You spend a good part of your life moving. Walking meditation is a way to practice mindfulness while you’re moving. During walking meditation you put your attention on your feet rather than your breath. When you notice you are thinking or distracted, simply bring your attention back to your feet and their movement—up and down.

You don’t need to look at your feet—just simply be aware of how your feet feel one step at a time as they lift and move through the air: Heel, sole, toe, heel, sole, toe. In particular, pay attention to the point the foot touches the ground, and the sensations of contacting the earth. Remember to feel each step, not just think about it or visualize it. Keep your posture upright, alert, and relaxed. You can hold your hands at your sides, or clasped in front or behind. Keep your eyes open, cast down, and slightly ahead. Experiment with how fast you walk, perhaps slowly or at a more regular speed. Find the pace where you feel most present and aware.

You are here, walking on the earth. It’s good to be alive.

Try walking in silence for a few minutes now.