

Different forms of practice – by Barry Boyce

The form of mindfulness/awareness practice passed on to us by Trungpa Rinpoche is essentially the mindfulness-of-breathing practice introduced in the earliest forms of Buddhism. However, a few choices he made about aspects to emphasize will likely cause it to differ from what many people will have learned.

- The first has to do with *keeping the eyes open*.
- The second has to do with *following the outbreath*.
- The third is how he characterized the relationship to thoughts in the practice: *touch and go*.
- In addition, he emphasized some points of posture that may not have been presented in the kind of practice people may have been doing.

In the early days of our sangha, in most cases we tried pretty hard (sometimes aggressively so) to persuade people to give up their previous practice style—at least while meditating in our shrine rooms. These days—given that teachings on meditation have very wide exposure, including all over the internet and the phones in people’s pockets—it seems wiser to ease people into understanding our style of practice and to help people discover what purposes it serves.

The most helpful approach is to avoid being doctrinaire, proselytizing for our cause, or denigrating other styles of meditation. Instead, just share your plain language understanding of the style we use and see if folks will begin to incline in that direction. After all, if they see others doing it, and your attitude conveys no big deal about it, they’re more likely to be drawn in that direction.

Eyes Open

In most presentations of mindfulness and Insight Meditation, the instructions are to keep the eyes closed. Often teachers will say in guided meditations, “Close your eyes if you’re comfortable doing that.”—suggesting that closing your eyes might make you afraid or disoriented, so you keep them open, almost as a defense. In Zen teaching, many if not most people will have been taught to leave their eyes open (often cast down, half or just slightly open; enough not to fall asleep but not so much as to promote distraction). In our technique, the eyes are open the way we normally would, but the gaze is *slightly* down (reducing periphery) and the focus is soft—not looking at anything in particular. The point of eyes open is neither defensive nor to invite distraction. It goes along with the overall sense of simply being in space and connected to the phenomenal world.

Everyone, in all traditions, does walking meditation with eyes open, so you might point that out. If you can do it in walking, why not try it in sitting?

Outbreath

The breath is the most common place to anchor the attention, so that aspect will be familiar with most people who have been instructed in meditation or followed along on an app. Most

instructions, however, emphasize paying attention to the entire process of the breath or suggest picking some point along the continuum, such as when it leaves and enters the nostrils or at the rising and falling of the abdomen.

Focusing on the breath as a locus of attention is amorphous to begin with. It's just air! So, asking people to follow the outbreath or to "go out with the breath" may present an even further challenge. Almost every time he presented shamatha/vipashyana, though, Trungpa Rinpoche strongly emphasized following the breath out, leaving a gap, boycotting the inbreath. Going out, as with having the eyes open, invites spaciousness, openness, emergence, rather than management of attention. Though the challenges it presents may make things awkward at times, they confound our attempts to turn mindfulness into mental babysitting.

People used to paying attention to the whole breath cycle may need time to move in the direction of the outbreath. Conveying a personal feel for what you're asking folks to try rather than forcing a prescription on them is the best thing you can do. The chapter called "The Teddy Bear of Breath" in *Mindfulness in Action* presents this style of practice with some very evocative metaphors you may find helpful.

Labelling & Touch-and-Go

In the technique as presented by Trungpa Rinpoche, the early instruction includes labelling thinking. Rather than labelling a thought as a particular kind of thought (e.g., judgment, lust, anger, past, future, etc.) as is done in some mindfulness practice methods, we simply use the blanket label "thinking." The simple noting of the process of thinking can jerk us back to noticing the next outbreath, no matter how long we've been away. This approach enables what Trungpa Rinpoche referred to as touch and go.

At its most basic, when we *touch*, we notice, we are aware, then we *go*—letting go of following up on the thought and also letting go of the awareness as something special. We touch our sense of being there and let that go. This leaves a gap of open space. Genuine meditation. As Trungpa Rinpoche says in the chapter called "Recollection" in *Mindfulness in Action*, "...first there is recollection [another common word for mindfulness]; then you disown this glimpse; and then you continue whatever you are doing...." By "recollection" here, he means recalling our fundamental awareness. Having done so, we don't cling to it, we disown it. We let it go.

Note: Chapter 16 of *Mindfulness in Action* is devoted to Touch and Go, and the Afterword of the book, by Carolyn Gimian, discusses "unique aspect[s] of the meditation technique that Chögyam Trungpa presented."

Posture points

Our approach uses six points of posture (seat, legs, torso, hands, eyes, mouth). Concerning the seat, the Vidyadhara emphasized not perching or hanging back on the cushion, being like a rider on horse or a monarch on a throne, which is one of the reasons he introduced the gomden. Many people will like to perch on the edge of a cushion and have an acute downward slope with their legs. While it can make sense as a way to aid sitting in full or half-lotus, with the cushion just supporting the tail bone, it doesn't give the sense of taking a dignified seat that the Vidyadhara emphasized. This can be very difficult to bring folks around to. Breath technique is

one thing; messing with how people hold their body is touchier territory. It might bear waiting a while till a relationship is established to broach this subject.

Resting your hands on your knees or thighs (upper arms parallel to torso) is recommended. Cosmic mudra is also OK. Very few people do this.

A mudra one commonly sees in popular depictions of meditation—hands turned up, often with thumb and forefinger joined—is not a shamatha practice mudra. According to [Lion's Roar](#), this mudra “is widely taught in yoga to promote deep diaphragm breathing and concentration. In Hinduism, it symbolizes union with the divine. We are not aware of it being used in Buddhist meditation.”

People seated in chairs are encouraged to keep their feet on the floor and not use the back of the chair for support. *Seiza* position (kneeling, usually using a bench) is also an acceptable posture; often people with certain kinds of back issues require it.

Upright but not stiff is the watchword whatever the method.

Always take into account physical disabilities or difficulties a person may have.

Mudra and Pace in Walking

There are at least two aspects of the walking meditation style we use that may differ from what people may be used to. The most obvious is the mudra, which we have borrowed from Zen, where it's called *shashu*. People are likely to just let their arms be at their sides, or to swing, or to very loosely join their hands. Best for you to review the mudra and be able to convey in your own words how it helps to maintain a good head and shoulders posture and a focus on the gait (i.e., If the arms are swinging or loose, there is more going on with the body that one could attend to when bringing one's attention back). As with other aspects of the practice, best is to gently inform and persuade rather than dictate. It's not the end of the world if people don't do the mudra. If they stick around, they will likely end up adopting it.

Pacing is often also an issue. There are forms of walking meditation (such as *kinhin*) that are done very slowly and often with the gaze quite low. Our approach is a slightly slowed version of a normal walk (neither funereal nor jaunty) with the gaze slightly down as in sitting meditation. Best to remind people of the pace from time to time, especially if it slows too much, but generally the problem corrects itself as people get in sync. Also, if the room is not large enough for the number of people walking in a circle, you need to make more circles to allow for an appropriate walking pace.

Other Forms of “Meditation”

A few general notes about what else you might encounter from people's experience of meditation.

Many people will be accustomed to *guided meditations*; if they ask about it, you can convey that guiding in our tradition is used primarily as a form of training wheels, but generally the goal is to spend time quietly with your own mind, not someone else's voice. (There are guided inquiry meditations, usually of an advanced nature, such as Mahamudra investigations, but no need to confuse folks with talking about those kinds of practices, unless someone brings it up.)

People will often use the phrase “doing *a* meditation,” which generally refers to following some kind of guided meditation script. We don’t use this terminology, since it implies a focus on the content of the meditation practice, rather than touch and go practice.

Body scans and *yoga nidra* are very common these days in mindfulness circles. These are more akin to progressive relaxation techniques. Strictly speaking, they do not fall within shamatha/vipashyana practice, so we don’t formally employ them.

There are lots of forms of *using thoughts to cultivate qualities or ingrain habits*. We generally classify these as contemplative meditation practices. Tonglen is one such example in our tradition. There are far too many to enumerate. The most common one, a close cousin of tonglen, is lovingkindness meditation, using repeated phrases and a focus on different types of people (e.g., loved one, friend, stranger, enemy).

People may also use a practice that expels negative thoughts on the outbreath and breathes in strength and resilience. While this seems like the opposite of tonglen, it doesn’t pay to argue that it’s wrong practice. Mostly people learn this practice from therapists to work with anxiety and other issues. Best not to push the issue. With all forms of “meditation” that use thoughts and phrases, when someone is practicing in the meditation hall we encourage them to engage with simple shamatha, whatever else they may do elsewhere.

Finally, there are forms of meditation that focus on a mantra, such as Transcendental Meditation (TM). It’s a relaxation technique, and effective at that, but it is not a mindfulness practice strictly speaking. You may point out that shamatha allows us more space to encounter our thoughts and get to the true source of our lack of relaxation. There are also forms of meditation you encounter where folks may focus on an external object, such as a candle or picture. One can simply point out the power of resting attention on the breath, which immediately connects us with the rhythms of our body and mind and has no content to clutter things up with. People may also have experience with mindfulness practice with a focus on other aspects of the sensory field, such as sound. One can acknowledge that such practices exist, and simply mention that in our daily practice we keep it simple, using what is most easily available to train the mind: the breath, which reliably returns every few seconds so long as we are living.