



FULL CATASTROPHE LIVING

Using the Wisdom
of Your Body and
Mind to Face Stress,
Pain, and Illness

THE PROGRAM OF THE STRESS
REDUCTION CLINIC AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS
MEDICAL CENTER

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Sitting Meditation: Nourishing the Domain of Being

In the first class each person gets a chance to say why he or she has come to the stress clinic and what he or she hopes to accomplish. Last week Linda described feeling as if a large truck were always right on her heels, driving just faster than she can walk. It was an image people could relate to; the vividness of it sent a wave of acknowledging nods and smiles through the room.

“What did she think the truck actually was?” I asked. Her impulses, her cravings (she was very overweight), her desires, she responded. In a word, her mind. Her mind was the truck. It was always right behind her, pushing, driving her, allowing her no rest, no peace.

We have already mentioned how our behavior and our feeling states can be driven by the play of the mind’s likes and dislikes, by our addictions and aversions. When you look, is it not accurate to say that your mind is constantly seeking satisfaction, making plans to ensure that things will go your way, trying to get what you want or think you need and at the same time trying to ward off the things you fear, the things you don’t want to happen? As a consequence of this common play of our minds, don’t we all tend to fill up our days with things that just *have* to be done and then run around desperately trying to do them all, while in the process not really enjoying much of the doing because we are too pressed for time, too rushed, too busy, too anxious? We can feel overwhelmed by our schedules, our responsibilities, and our roles at times even when everything we are doing is important, even when we have chosen to do them all. We live immersed in a world of constant doing. Rarely are we in

touch with who is doing the doing or, put otherwise, with the world of being.

To get back in touch with being is not that difficult. We only need to remind ourselves to be mindful. Moments of mindfulness are moments of peace and stillness, even in the midst of activity. When your whole life is driven by doing, formal meditation practice can provide a refuge of sanity and stability that can be used to restore some balance and perspective. It can be a way of stopping the headlong momentum of all the doing and giving yourself some time to dwell in a state of deep relaxation and well-being and to remember who you are. The formal practice can give you the strength and the self-knowledge to go back to the doing and do it from out of your being. Then at least a certain amount of patience and inner stillness, clarity and balance of mind, will infuse what you are doing, and the busyness and pressure will be less onerous. In fact they might just disappear entirely.

Meditation is really a non-doing. It is the only human endeavor I know of that does not involve trying to get somewhere else but, rather, emphasizes being where you already are. Much of the time we are so carried away by all the doing, the striving, the planning, the reacting, the busyness, that when we stop just to feel where we are, it can seem a little peculiar at first. For one thing we tend to have little awareness of the incessant and relentless activity of our own mind and how much we are driven by it. That is not too surprising, given that we hardly ever stop and observe the mind directly to see what it is up to. We seldom look dispassionately at the reactions and habits of our own mind, at its fears and its desires.

It takes a while to get comfortable with the richness of allowing yourself to just *be* with your own mind. It's a little like meeting an old friend for the first time in years. There may be some awkwardness at first, not knowing who this person is anymore, not knowing quite how to be with him or her. It may take some time to reestablish the bond, to refamiliarize yourselves with each other.

Ironically although we all "have" minds, we seem to need to "re-mind" ourselves of who we are from time to time. If we don't, the momentum of all the doing just takes over and can have us living its agenda rather than our own, almost as if we were robots. The momentum of unbridled doing can carry us for decades, even to the grave, without our quite knowing that we are living out our lives and that we have only moments to live.

Given all the momentum behind our doing, getting ourselves to remember the preciousness of the present moment seems to

require somewhat unusual and even drastic steps. This is why we make a special time each day for formal meditation practice. It is a way of stopping, a way of "re-minding" ourselves, of nourishing the domain of being for a change.

To make time in your life for being, for non-doing, may at first feel stilted and artificial. Until you actually get into it, it can sound like just one more "thing" to *do*. "Now I have to find time to meditate on top of all the obligations and stresses I already have in my life." And on one level there is no getting around the fact that this is true.

But once you see the critical need to nourish your being, once you see the need to calm your heart and your mind and to find an inner balance with which to face the storms of life, your commitment to make that time a priority and the requisite discipline to make it a reality develop naturally. Making time to meditate becomes easier. After all, if you discover for yourself that it really does nourish what is deepest in you, you will certainly find a way.



We call the heart of the formal meditation practice "sitting meditation" or simply "sitting." As with breathing, sitting is not foreign to anyone. We all sit, nothing special about that. But mindful sitting is different from ordinary sitting in the same way that mindful breathing is different from ordinary breathing. The difference, of course, is your awareness.

To practice sitting, we make a special time and place for non-doing, as suggested in Chapter 2. We consciously adopt an alert and relaxed body posture so that we can feel relatively comfortable without moving, and then we reside with calm acceptance in the present without trying to fill it with anything. You have already tried this in the various exercises in which you have watched your breathing.

It helps a lot to adopt an erect and dignified posture, with your head, neck, and back aligned vertically. This allows the breath to flow most easily. It is also the physical counterpart of the inner attitudes of self-reliance, self-acceptance, and alert attention that we are cultivating.

We usually practice the sitting meditation either on a chair or on the floor. If you choose a chair, the ideal is to use one that has a straight back and that allows your feet to be flat on the floor. We often recommend that if possible you sit away from the back of the

chair so that your spine is self-supporting (see Figure 2A). But if you have to, leaning against the back of the chair is also fine. If you choose to sit on the floor, do so on a firm, thick cushion which raises your buttocks off the floor three to six inches (a pillow folded over once or twice does nicely; or you can purchase a meditation cushion, or *zafu*, specifically for sitting).

There are a number of cross-legged sitting postures and kneeling postures that some people use when they sit on the floor. The one I use most is the so-called "Burmese" posture (see Figure 2B), which involves drawing one heel in close to the body and draping the other leg in front of it. Depending on how flexible your hips and knees and ankles are, your knees may or may not be touching the floor. It is somewhat more comfortable when they are. Others use a kneeling posture, placing the cushion between the feet (see Figure 2C).

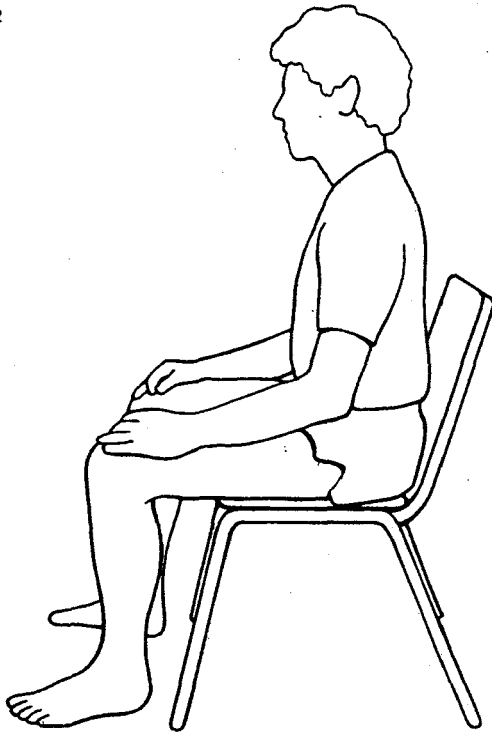
Sitting on the floor can give you a reassuring feeling of being "grounded" and self-supporting in the meditation posture, but it is not necessary to meditate sitting on the floor or in a cross-legged posture. Some of our patients prefer the floor, but most sit on straight-backed chairs. Ultimately it is not what you are sitting on that matters in meditation but the sincerity of your effort.

Whether you choose the floor or a chair, posture is very important in meditation practice. It can be an outward support in cultivating an inner attitude of dignity, patience, and self-acceptance. The main points to keep in mind about your posture are to try to keep the back, neck, and head aligned in the vertical, to relax the shoulders, and to do something comfortable with your hands. Usually we place them on the knees, as in Figure 2, or we rest them in the lap with the fingers of the left hand above the fingers of the right and the tips of the thumbs just touching each other.

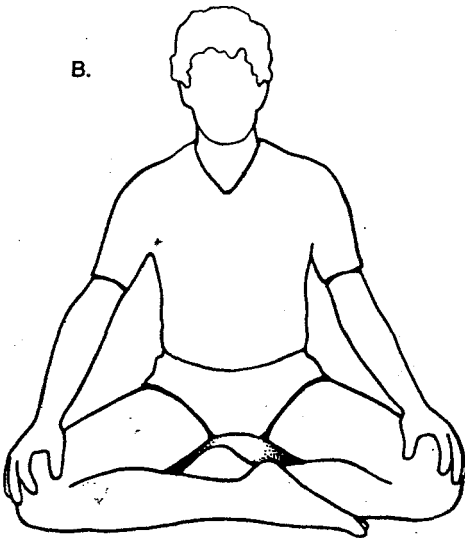
When we have assumed the posture we have selected, we bring our attention to our breathing. We *feel* it come in, we *feel* it go out. We dwell in the present, moment by moment, breath by breath. It sounds simple, and it is. Full awareness on the inbreath, full awareness on the outbreath. Letting the breath just happen, observing it, feeling all the sensations, gross and subtle, associated with it.

It is simple but it is not easy. You can probably sit in front of a TV set or in a car on a trip for hours without giving it a thought. But when you try sitting in your house with nothing to watch but your breath, your body, and your mind, with nothing to entertain you and no place to go, the first thing you will probably notice is that at least part of you doesn't want to stay at this for very long.

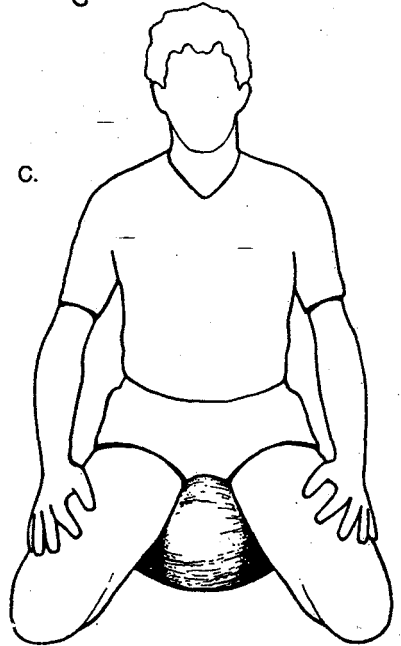
FIGURE 2



A.



B.



C.

After perhaps a minute or two or three or four, either the body or the mind will have had enough and will demand something else, either to shift to some other posture or to do something else entirely. This is inevitable.

It is at this point that the work of self-observation gets particularly interesting and fruitful. Normally every time the mind moves, the body follows. If the mind is restless, the body is restless. If the mind wants a drink, the body goes to the kitchen sink or the refrigerator. If the mind says, "This is boring," then before you know it, the body is up and looking around for the next thing to do to keep the mind happy. It also works the other way around. If the body feels the slightest discomfort, it will shift to be more comfortable or it will call on the mind to find something else for it to do, and again, you will be standing up literally before you know it.

If you are genuinely committed to being more peaceful and relaxed, you might wonder why it is that your mind is so quick to be bored with being with itself and why your body is so restless and uncomfortable. You might wonder what is behind your impulses to fill each moment with something; what is behind your need to be entertained whenever you have an "empty" moment, to jump up and get going, to get back to doing and being busy? What drives the body and mind to reject being still?

In practicing meditation we don't try to answer such questions. Rather we just observe the impulse to get up or the thoughts that come into the mind. And instead of jumping up and doing whatever the mind decides is next on the agenda, we gently but firmly bring our attention back to the belly and to the breathing and just continue to watch the breath, moment by moment. We may ponder why the mind is like this for a moment or two, but basically we are practicing accepting each moment as it is without reacting to *how* it is. So we keep sitting, following our breathing.

THE BASIC MEDITATION INSTRUCTIONS

The basic instructions for practicing the sitting meditation are very simple. We observe the breath as it flows in and out. We give full attention to the feeling of the breath as it comes in and full attention to the feeling of the breath as it goes out, just as we did in Chapters 1 and 3. And whenever we find that our attention has moved elsewhere, wherever that may be, we just note it and let go and gently escort our attention back to the breath, back to the rising and falling of our own belly.

If you have been trying it, perhaps you will have already noticed that your mind tends to move around a lot. You may have contracted with yourself to keep your attention focused on the breath no matter what. But before long, you will undoubtedly find that the mind is off someplace else . . . it has forgotten the breath, it has been drawn away.

Each time you become aware of this while you are sitting, you gently bring your attention back to your belly and back to your breathing, no matter what carried it away. If it moves off the breath a hundred times, then you just calmly bring it back a hundred times, as soon as you are aware of not being on the breath.

By doing so you are training your mind to be less reactive and more stable. You are making each moment count. You are taking each moment as it comes, not valuing any one above any other. In this way you are cultivating your natural ability to concentrate your mind. By repeatedly bringing your attention back to the breath each time it wanders off, concentration builds and deepens, much as muscles develop by repetitively lifting weights. Working regularly with (not struggling against) the resistance of your own mind builds inner strength. At the same time you are also developing patience and practicing being non-judgmental. You are not giving yourself a hard time because your mind left the breath. You simply and matter-of-factly return it to the breath, gently but firmly.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT YOUR BODY'S DISCOMFORT

As you will quickly see when you sit down to meditate, almost anything can carry your attention away from your breathing. One big source of distracting impulses is your body. As a rule, if you sit still for a while in any position, your body will become uncomfortable. Normally we are continually shifting our position without much awareness of it in response to this discomfort. But when practicing meditation, it is actually useful to resist the first impulse to shift position in response to bodily discomfort. Instead we direct our attention to these sensations of discomfort and mentally welcome them.

Why? Because at the moment they come into awareness, these sensations of discomfort become part of our present-moment experience and thus worthy objects of observation and inquiry in and of themselves. They give us the opportunity to look directly at our automatic reactions and at the whole process of what happens as the

mind loses its balance and becomes agitated as it is drawn away from the breath.

In this way the pain in your knee, or the aching in your back, or the tension in your shoulders, rather than being treated as distractions preventing you from staying with your breath, can be included in the field of your awareness and simply accepted without reacting to them as undesirable and trying to make them go away. This approach gives you an alternate way of seeing discomfort. Uncomfortable as they may be, these bodily sensations are now potential teachers and allies in learning about yourself. They can help you to develop your powers of concentration, calmness, and awareness rather than just being frustrating impediments to the goal of trying to stay on your breath.

The cultivation of this kind of flexibility, which allows you to welcome *whatever* comes up and be with it rather than insisting on paying attention to only one thing, say the breath, is one of the most characteristic and valuable features of mindfulness meditation.

What this means in practice is that we make some effort to sit *with* sensations of discomfort when they come up during our attempts to meditate, not necessarily to the point of pain but at least past where we might ordinarily react to them. We breathe *with* them. We welcome them and actually try to maintain a continuity of awareness from moment to moment in their presence. Then, if we have to, we shift our body to reduce the discomfort, but *we do even that mindfully*, with moment-to-moment awareness as we are moving.

It's not that the meditative process considers messages about discomfort and pain that the body produces to be unimportant. On the contrary, as you will see in Chapters 22 and 23, we consider pain and discomfort to be important enough to merit a deeper looking into. The best way of looking into them is to welcome them when they come rather than trying to make them go away because we don't like them. By sitting with some discomfort and accepting it as part of our experience in the moment, even if we don't like it, which we don't, we discover that it is actually possible to relax into physical discomfort. This is one example of how discomfort or even pain can be your teacher and help you to heal.

Relaxing into discomfort sometimes reduces pain intensity. The more you practice, the more skill you can develop in reducing pain or at least becoming more transparent to it. But whether you experience pain reduction or not during the sitting meditation, intentionally working with your reactions to discomfort will help

you to develop some degree of calmness and equanimity, qualities which will prove useful in facing many different challenges and stressful situations as well as pain (see Parts II and III).

HOW TO WORK WITH THOUGHTS IN MEDITATION

Aside from physical discomfort and pain, there are numerous other occurrences during meditation that can carry your attention away from the breath. The primary one is thinking. Just because you decide to still your body and observe your breath from moment to moment doesn't mean that your thinking mind is going to cooperate. It doesn't quiet down just because you have decided to meditate!

What does happen as we pay attention to our breathing is that we see that we live immersed in a seemingly never-ending stream of thoughts, coming willy-nilly, one after another in rapid succession. Many people are greatly relieved when they come back after practicing meditation on their own during their first week in the stress clinic and discover that they were not the only ones who found that their thoughts cascaded through their mind like a waterfall, completely beyond their control. They are reassured to learn that everybody in the class has a mind that behaves in this way. It is just the way the mind is.

This discovery amounts to a revelation for many of the people in the stress clinic. It becomes the occasion of or sets the stage for a profound learning experience that many claim is the most valuable thing they get out of their meditation training, namely the realization that they are not their thoughts. This discovery means that they can consciously choose to relate or not to relate to their thoughts in a variety of ways that were not available to them when they were unaware of this simple fact.

In the early stages of meditation practice the activity of thought is constantly pulling our attention away from the primary task we have set ourselves in the developing of calmness and concentration, namely to be with the breath. In order to build continuity and momentum in the meditation practice, you will need to keep reminding yourself to come back to the breath, no matter what the mind is up to from one moment to the next.

The things you find yourself thinking about during meditation may or may not be important to you, but important or not, they do seem to lead a life of their own, as we have seen. If you are in a period of high stress, the mind will tend to obsess about your

predicament, what you should do, or should have done, or shouldn't do, or shouldn't have done. At such times your thoughts may be highly charged with anxiety and worry.

At less stressful times the thoughts that go through your mind may be less anxious in nature, but they can be just as powerful in taking your attention away from the breath. You may find yourself thinking about a movie you saw, or fall captive to a song in your head that stubbornly refuses to leave. Or you may be thinking about dinner, or work, or your parents, or your children, or other people, or your vacation, or your health, or death, or your bills, or just about anything else. Thoughts of one kind or another will cascade through the mind as you sit, most of them below the level of your awareness, until finally you realize that you are not watching your breathing anymore and you don't even know how long it's been since you were aware of it, nor how you got to what you are thinking now that you have woken up to the fact that the breath was forgotten.

It's at this point that you say, "Okay, let's just go back to the breath right now and let go of the thoughts I'm having, no matter what they are." It also helps at such moments to check your posture and sit up straight again if your body has slumped over, which it commonly does when your awareness becomes dull.

During meditation we treat all our thoughts as if they are of equal value. We try to be aware of them when they come up and then we intentionally return our attention to the breath as the major focus of observation, *regardless of the content of the thought!* In other words, we intentionally practice letting go of each thought that attracts our attention, whether it seems important and insightful or unimportant and trivial. We just observe them as thoughts, as discrete events that appear in the field of our awareness. We are aware of them because they are there but we intentionally decline getting caught up in the content of the thoughts during meditation, no matter how charged the content may be for us at that moment. Instead we remind ourselves to perceive them simply as thoughts, as seemingly independently occurring events in the field of our awareness. We note their content and the amount of "charge" they have, in other words whether they are weak or strong in their power to dominate the mind at that moment. Then, no matter how charged they are for us at that moment, we intentionally let go and refocus on our breathing once again and on the experience of being "in our body" as we sit.

Letting go of our thoughts, however, does not mean suppress-

ing them. Many people hear it this way and make the mistake of thinking that meditation requires them to shut off their thinking or their feelings. They somehow hear the instructions as meaning that if they are thinking, that is "bad," and that a "good meditation" is one in which there is little or no thinking. So it is important to emphasize that *thinking is not bad nor is it even undesirable during meditation. What matters is whether you are aware of your thoughts and feelings during meditation and how you handle them.* Trying to suppress them will only result in greater tension and frustration and more problems, not in calmness and peace.

Mindfulness does not involve pushing thoughts away or walling yourself off from them to quiet your mind. We are not trying to stop our thoughts as they cascade through the mind. We are simply making room for them, observing them as thoughts, and letting them be, using the breath as our anchor or "home base" for observing, for reminding us to stay focused and calm.

In proceeding in this way, you will find that every meditation is different. Sometimes you may feel relatively calm and relaxed and undisturbed by thoughts or strong feelings. At other times the thoughts and feelings may be so strong and recurrent that all you can do is watch them as best you can and be with your breath as much as you can in between. *Meditation is not so concerned with how much thinking is going on as it is with how much room you are making for it to take place within the field of your awareness from one moment to the next.*



It is remarkable how liberating it feels to be able to see that your thoughts are just thoughts and that they are not "you" or "reality." For instance, if you have the thought that you have to get a certain number of things done today and you don't recognize it as a thought but act as if it's "the truth," then you have created a reality *in that moment* in which you really believe that those things must all be done today.

Peter, who, we saw in Chapter 1, had come because he had had a heart attack and wanted to prevent another one, came to a dramatic realization of this one night when he found himself washing his car at ten o'clock at night with the floodlights on in the driveway. It struck him that he didn't *have* to be doing this. It was just the inevitable result of a whole day spent trying to fit everything in that he *thought* needed doing. As he saw what he was doing to