

Dual Awareness Meditation

The essential aspect of the practice life is to bring our attention to just this moment.

We always have the choice to either spin off into thinking or to just be here, with whatever the moment brings. This choice point is the basis of our sitting practice, in which we notice our particular patterns of inattention to the present moment. Do you know your own patterns? Do you habitually spin off into planning, fantasizing, self-judging? Or do you tend to dwell in internal conversations—reliving the past or in imagining the future? In noticing our patterns and returning to the moment, we make the choice moment after moment to just be here. In this way we develop the awareness that allows the energy of thoughts and emotions to simply pass through without our getting hooked.

One technique that many have found helpful in developing this wider container of awareness is called dual awareness practice. In dual awareness you maintain your attention simultaneously on the specific sensations of the breath and the specific perceptions of sound, bringing roughly a third of your attention to breathing and listening. The rest of your awareness is open to experiencing any other sensations or perceptions that arise within the wider container of breath and sounds.

Try this now. Bring your awareness to the specific sensations of the breath. Feel the coolness of the breath as it enters your nostrils, and then feel the subtle texture in the nose as you exhale. Feel the sensations in the chest and shoulders as they rise and fall with each inhalation and exhalation. Experience the feelings of expansion and contraction in the belly as the breath comes in and goes out. Now feel all of these sensations together—on the inbreath, the coolness in the nostrils, the rising of the upper body, the expansion of the belly; and on the outbreath, the subtle texture in the nose, the falling of the upper body and the contraction in the belly. Stay with these physical sensations for a few cycles of the breath.

As you stay with the experience of the breath, notice your own particular rhythm of breathing. Don't try to control this rhythm; simply allow it to function at its own pace. So if the breath is shallow or rapid, let it be shallow or rapid. Don't try to make it slow or deep. In other words, let the breath breathe itself. Every time you find yourself trying to control the breath, notice the tightness and then let the breath find its own rhythm.

Continue to stay with the sensations and rhythm of the breath. Then expand the awareness to include the perception of sounds. Include not only the varied ambient sounds, but also the sounds between the sounds, the sounds of silence. Staying with this dual experience of breath and sounds, allow the awareness to widen again so that the experience of breathing and listening takes up around one-third of your attention. Allow any other sensations and perceptions to come into awareness, feeling them within the wider container of breathing and listening. Feel the energy in the body, or the strongest sensations. Feel them as you continue to be aware of breath and sounds.

You can do this practice for the entire sitting period, and as it becomes more and more familiar, you will be able to include it as part of everyday awareness. Because one aspect (breath) is “inner” and the other (sounds) is “outer,” this practice takes us out of our normal myopic focus on “me,” with all of our mental judgments and opinions. This is where we can begin to experience the equanimity of just being. Equanimity is simply the willingness to be with whatever our life is, minus our judgments about it, minus our need to struggle to change it.

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