



ASK THE EXPERT

How to Find Peace of Mind

GENDO ALLYN FIELD | HEAD OF THE DARTMOUTH ZEN PRACTICE GROUP

“There’s a lot of talk about meditation and mindfulness-based stress reduction these days,” says Field, founder of the Upper Valley Zen Center. “People have figured out that meditation actually is healthy.” Ordained in 2003 as a lay monk in the Rinzai Zen tradition, Field leads weekly sessions in the Tucker Center for students interested in learning the practices of chanting, sitting and walking meditation. Taking time out of a busy day to sit quietly and breathe is a lot harder than it sounds, however. “Everyone loves the idea of a quick fix that makes their life easier—the hard part is getting people to really dedicate themselves to practice,” says Field, who recommends the following steps for mindful living.

—James Napoli

SIT

“Start by sitting on a cushion where you can support yourself on your butt and two knees, like a tripod. Keep your spine, neck and head straight. Put your hands together in front of you—left hand flat on top of right—and touch your thumbs together gently, rolling them toward your belly button. Sit very still with your eyes open and cast down around the middle of the floor. Sitting with this balanced posture emphasizes both stillness and awareness, a contradiction that is fundamental to the practice of meditation. For some people it’s very difficult to sit this way, so it may help to do yoga and stretch before sitting.”

BREATHE

“Breathing is an essential part of Buddhist practice. As you sit, pay attention to your breath. Notice the relationship between in-breath and out-breath. You may even want to count your breaths. It’s actually very difficult to focus on breathing activity—I usually lose count around five or six—but it’s a very grounding thing to do. It’s a way to bring your attention to what’s happening in your body in this moment. Breathing is a fundamental interaction between what’s inside and what’s outside—it’s a demonstration of the fact that who we are is bigger than the body that we assume to be our self.”

FOCUS

“Much of Zen practice is really the practice of present moment awareness. One of the first lessons is to notice how hard it is to sit quietly without your mind drifting. The more you try to stop thinking, the more you become aware of it, like a dog chasing its own tail. It’s almost impossible to stop your mind from wandering, so you must instead embrace your thoughts. If you start to focus on how your thoughts develop and how they disappear of their own accord, then you don’t have to try to control them. This turns out to be very effective in bringing a certain stillness and peace of mind in the present moment.”

REPEAT

“We become so busy chasing after one thing or another—work, home, shopping, to-do lists—but you have to make time to practice. Find a place where you can sit quietly on a regular basis—a corner of the living room or a bedroom—and set aside a chair or cushion for a dedicated practice corner. That will make it easier to establish a routine. I used to practice early in the morning, before my children were awake. It’s also helpful to join a meditation group to reinforce those habits. It’s an important part of practice to develop some sense of community and get support for something that’s inherently difficult.”