



EXERCISE # 3 – WORKING WITH OUR THOUGHTS

Begin by sitting on a straight-backed chair or couch or on a cushion on the floor. Or, if you're taking a few moments during the day or time out of work, simply rest in whatever environment that you find yourself. Since we will eventually want to practice in any situation, ultimately it doesn't matter where we are as much as where our attention is. Allow your body to become still. The back is straight without being stiff; the posture is relaxed, awake, and dignified. The hands can rest gently on the knees or in the lap. Settling into this moment, begin watching the breath.

Now become aware of the fact that you're breathing. Become aware of the movement of the breath as it flows into and out of the body. Feel the breath as it comes into the body and as it leaves the body. Simply remain aware of the breath flowing in and flowing out, not manipulating the breathing in any way. Simply being aware of it and noticing how it feels.

Allow yourself to be with this flow of breath, coming in and going out. Notice the feeling of the breath as the lungs fill with air on the in-breath and deflate as you breathe out, the chest expanding and collapsing. Allow your attention to gently ride on the sensation of each breath, not thinking about breathing, without the need to comment. Simply watching your breathing.

Allow the breath to naturally breathe itself, not needing to change it in any way, giving full attention to each breath. Observe the full cycle of each breath, locating the very beginning of the breath, as it enters the nose or mouth, and following it as it fills the lungs and expands the chest and the abdomen, then comes to the gap where there is neither in-breath nor out-breath, before it turns around and makes its journey out of the body. Simply remain present for the cycle of each breath, being there, letting your attention gently float on the awareness of your breath.

Allow your attention to turn toward your mind and toward any thoughts that may arise. Simply watch your mind. When you become distracted, bring your mind back to the breath as an anchor, and then when you've refocused, return your attention to your thoughts.

As before, you'll probably notice that your mind wanders off to thoughts of the past, fantasies, memories, or regrets. Or it may move to anticipation of the future, planning, wishing, and judging. You may find yourself thinking about what you'll do after this exercise, what you have to do at work, things that you have to do.

This time, become aware of thoughts passing through the mind, noticing them but not engaging with them, allowing thoughts to be like clouds, drifting through a vast, spacious sky. If you find yourself carried away by a stream of thoughts or you notice that you are no longer observing right here, right now, in this moment, return to the breath, anchor yourself in the awareness of the breath, coming now to this breath. When you feel steady in the present, you can return again to witnessing the thoughts in the mind, allowing whatever is there to be there. Thoughts of fantasies, desires, likes, dislikes, memories, judgments, pressures of obligations. Aware perhaps of feelings or emotions: sadness, fear, joy, peace. Allowing all of your thoughts to simply emerge, as they are. Witnessing. Observing. Thoughts coming. Thoughts going. Not being drawn into analysis of those thoughts. Not pursuing them. Not rejecting or engaging the thoughts but seeing them as clouds in the vast, still sky of the mind.

Once you've watched your thoughts, "drop" the need to watch them and simply rest in the atmosphere that you've created without particularly trying to "do" anything. It's almost like floating on a raft in the water. You don't need to hold the raft up for it to float; you can simply be supported by the raft. In the same way, allow your attention to simply be supported by your mind watching its thoughts, without particularly doing anything.

What happens as you watch your thoughts? Just notice. Do they get stronger or weaker? Do they seem to fade away? Maybe you experience a kind of clarity without thoughts? Whatever happens is fine. Just be in the place of watching your mind, watching your thoughts, without following them.

Once you've tried this for a while, simply let go of everything and rest in the space that you've created for a while.