



Embodied meditation techniques

The Six Core Techniques of Embodied Meditation

While different things work for different people at different times, we have found that this set of six techniques is helpful for most people. Please try all of these several times, and if you'd like to really get the benefits from this approach, then pick one to commit to for a period (two months is good). Use one as the regular core of your meditation. There is also a section in the next chapter on choosing and establishing a practice.

Note that timings are specifically not given so they can be expanded and contracted as you like, and all can be done in the four basic postures. Experienced practitioners can of course simply use this approach as loose inspiration or blend them with techniques already well known to them.

Aims, difficulty, methods, enquiries and movement

For each method we detail why you would do it – the aim. While too much goal direction can be unhelpful for meditation, it is very helpful to know what you are trying to gain from a practice. While on some deep abstract spiritual level there's truth in “going nowhere, doing nothing,” this isn't usually helpful as an orienting principle!

The aim is also the expected result of the meditation, though of course this isn't set in stone, and as previously mentioned the “how” in many ways leads this more than the “what” of the

technique. Note some meditations may develop a skill as the aim but may not always be relaxing or pleasant, as a beginner mistaking meditation with stress relief might find. Though of course a degree of ease helps a lot and if meditations are overwhelming feel free to change them or shift practice. While a degree of difficulty is to be expected, too much challenge isn't helpful either.

The key “learning zone” to keep yourself in is a moderation of challenge to engage you and indicate growth may well be happening, but not too much so it demotivates you or drains you for life. Critically if one is well resourced in life the opportunity for growth through challenge exists, whereas if one is depleted or struggling generally in life, there is a necessity for easier more restorative practice. Likewise, any natural enthusiasm for a technique should be followed to some degree, but also balanced with an element of discipline as to what one needs (following aims that match what one requires, as opposed to simply what one likes). For beginners however, ease and pleasure is key – establishing any regular meditation practice at all is hard enough!

Hopefully we give a clear “how” for each technique – this is the method. Most meditations have a simple “do this” operational technique which we hope makes them practical and accessible. A pet dislike of ours is instructions like “empty your mind” which

Embodied meditation techniques

have no method given! “OK mate, HOWWWW do I empty my mind??!!”. In addition to the primary method, we sometimes give enquiries which provide a different more exploratory way into each technique. Some students FAR prefer this approach, while others get little from it and need direct instructions, so we present both options.

One departure from many traditional practices is that in addition to the main technique, we encourage some small movements, guided breathing, postural changes, touch and even sounding (making noises). The reason for this is that all these engage the body and are excellent “anchors” to the present moment for the hyper-distracted modern mind. The idea here is not to fidget, wriggle or to entertain yourself, but more as a subtle helping hand back to presence. These can be excellent if you find yourself drifting off, or are very tired or agitated (most people are simultaneously both these days much of the time), and usually you can gradually minimise their use in a session, moving towards stillness.

I (Mark) find these excellent with my ADHD as it gives me a little more sensation and variety to “hold onto”. On group retreats I have often moved very, very subtly so as not to distract others; and minimise sounding! Recently I have been further inspired in this method by somatic meditation teacher Jamie McHugh¹⁰ who has somewhat formalised this approach.



¹⁰ <http://www.somaticexpression.com/>

The basic body scan

Goal: To develop body awareness (CCDD) and concentration. It will also be relaxing and reduce stress in many cases.

Theory:

The body scan involves focusing our awareness on the body, throughout the body. It is perhaps THE fundamental practice in this book and in many traditions. It can be done in different ways, for example:

- Systematically - scanning from top to bottom or vice versa, or outside to inside
- Responsively - bringing awareness to what's most noticeable. Using anything what calls your attention as the anchor
- Completely - feeling the whole body at once in its entirety

Whichever scanning method you are doing, the idea is to bring awareness to the whole body over a period of time, not just the surface or a specific part of the body.. Do not ignore areas that are numb, or that are less noticeable for other reasons such as the back - this is a risk of the (often easier) responsive method if used alone. Often we use systematic body scanning as the standard technique, and emergent for when we're more distracted and needing an easier "anchor", but there is no hard and fast rule. Whole body awareness is challenging for most (and not the same as rapid scanning). One can also play

unusual games with awareness to challenge skills, for example being aware of just one side of the body at a time, or rapidly jumping between areas. Experiment and find what works for you.

People may call this technique a "basic" practice but there are people who do this as their only practice their entire life, and it is enough. Trust that more detail and profundity opens with it in time too, and look for this. An attitude of open-minded curiosity is often helpful to "go deeper".

Method:

Bring awareness to the physical sensations of the body, and when the mind drifts, bring it gently but firmly back. Be aware of yourself as a body. Inhabit yourself.

As with all concentration meditations, the method here is to keep returning the attention to the focus (the body) whenever you get distracted. Many times, if necessary! Do not worry if you do not have an empty mind, it is normal to become distracted by thoughts, especially planning; and by other senses such as outside sounds. If you notice you are distracted, great, you are present! Come back to the body with a determined but kind attitude (berating yourself will not help).

One can use noting and labelling sensations as an addition to aid these techniques, by opening to a moment and allowing

a sensation to really “sink in”, and then naming it internally or out-loud. Examples include, “tightening”, “expanding”, “relaxing”, “warmth”, etc. Noting and labelling can aid concentration, as will guided meditations for most (many are online including ours at <https://embodiedmeditationbook.com>), so use either approach if you are very distracted.

Be careful to actually feel the body, not just to imagine or visualise the body.

Inquiries:

- Where am I not feeling? Where are the blindspots? Am I subtly avoiding an area?
- How deep am I feeling? What would it mean to be really present to the body now?
- Am I aware OF or aware AS? What would the latter mean as an experience?
- What in more detail is this feeling?
- How much can I feel at once?
- Where feels more or less like “me”?

Touch, breathwork and movement:

If any area is hard to feel it can be helpful to add gentle movement, breathe “into” the area¹¹ or touch yourself slowly and gently on the surface of the area. Of course, doing this

meditation after something like a shower, exercise, sauna or massage which brings awareness to the whole body through sensation can be helpful too.

Emotional “Digestion” Meditation

Goal: To process emotions.

To “get over” stuff. To release micro-trauma. Holistic well-being. To both learn from, and feel good again, after a difficult life event.

Theory:

This is similar to complete body awareness but it focuses on areas that have an emotive tone – often the face, throat, chest and belly. The idea here is to sit “with” the feelings – both physical and emotional. While in English the word “feeling” covers both of these, in Buddhist practice they are referred to as the “first and second foundations of mindfulness”. It is probably intuitively known by most people that sadness (2nd foundation) is not the same as indigestion (1st) for example. The latter is just bodily sensations, while the former has an additional subtle, almost non-local, meaningful and emergent quality.

Awareness is a kind of emotionally digestive “enzyme”, helping emotions transform naturally in beneficial ways. You could also think of this meditation as a form of gentle bodily self-empathy.

¹¹ Breathe so there’s movement in the direction of the area and use visualisation to support this

Any concentration meditation will stop us self-generating emotions with story (by interrupting our narrative with another focus) so will be stress relieving if we are generating unpleasant emotions. However, this meditation is especially good for this as it also works on a level of natural processing that other mere distractions do not - distracting ourselves from emotions by ignoring or suppressing them doesn't encourage any processing and transforming of emotion.

Method:

Bring awareness to whole body emotional sensations, and when the mind drifts, bring it gently back. Stay with them non-reactively.

In this method one stays present to physical and emotional sensations, allowing them to change and transform (without trying to force this). The stance of sitting with a grieving friend is very helpful for this technique. The idea is to stay kindly present and not interfere. Just be with your "heart" (your overall bodily emotional tone), and other specific sensations that feel significant or emotive, in the here and now.

You may notice sighs, relaxations of chronic tension, temperature changes or other indications of release. With time a clear, often pleasant, felt sense of having processed or "digested" emotions is noticeable. For many this can take as little as a few minutes, but there are also "layers" of this in most people. For bigger more impactful emotional states such

as acute grief and historical trauma it can take days or even years¹².

Importantly, while thoughts, memories, images etcetera may well come up, DO NOT follow these or start analysing yourself. This is not body assisted therapy (which does have value but is different). It is just sitting with oneself gently, allowing witnessing with self-empathy to bring naturally flowing change. If you follow a train of thought it will reset the "digestion" process. Similarly, you may have creative urges or want to contact someone to tell them something - do not follow these during the meditation¹³.

Inquiries:

- Where do I feel this emotion in my body?
- What does it feel like? What are the qualities of the sensations in my body associated with this emotion?
- What part of my emotional experience am I pushing away?
- What feels most meaningful in my body now
- How do I feel about how I am feeling right now? I.e., is there a noticeable tendency to want to suppress / escape emotion, make it go away?
- Is there physical tension around the emotion I can let go of? Can I surrender to the feeling more (without being overwhelmed)?

¹² In these cases, there can be tears of release or unusual sensations like a knot being released deep inside one's guts, or like a warm egg being cracked open inside you.

¹³ Embodied meditation will almost certainly make you more creative by the way, but this is not the intention, more a by-product. If you want this as a goal, for example if you are an artist or poet, then split your practice into two clear sets with different intentions.

Touch, breathwork and movement:

- Placing a hand on the heart and/or the belly/ womb can be very soothing
- Gentle movement to encourage relaxation of tension accompanying emotions may be helpful. Emotions are movements so let them move, though this can be done with subtle movements
- Sounding (e.g., conscious sighs) can also be used to let go of emotion, and there's a huge range of breathwork possible to help digestion, such as briefly holding and then releasing the breath with emotion, NOT using the breath to soothe, and other techniques beyond the scope of this book. Many of these will come naturally though, as they are intuitive body wisdom we have to actively repress, more than skills we learn

Embodied Breath Awareness

Goal: To develop breath awareness and concentration
For many this will also be relaxing and pleasant

Theory:

Mindfulness of the breath in the body is part of most approaches to meditation. To ensure you are doing it in an embodied way, make sure you practice an extensive, all-encompassing awareness of where you can feel your breath in your body,

as opposed to just one point in the body. This could mean feeling the whole body moving with the breath, or just having a background sense of the body while being mostly focused on one point.

Practising awareness of the breath only in one place in your body, for example at the tip of your nose as is commonly done, can lead to disassociation from other parts of your body, and emotional “bypassing”. Although it is a valid form of concentration practice, this method could exacerbate the incompleteness of being which embodied meditation aims to remedy. It's not bad, but is not helpful for the aim here.

Breath awareness is a very classic meditation technique for several good reasons. Three of these are:

1. The breath is a very, very sensitive indicator of our body-mind states
2. It is constantly changing so it provides novel stimuli
3. Working with it can translate easily into daily life (as we are always breathing).

Breath is deeply associated with life itself being the element that when removed causes death quicker than any other (as compared with say sleep or food). There is also a cross cultural association through language (e.g., “spirit”) , and mythology (e.g., God breathing life into dirt to create people)

Method:

Bring awareness to the physical sensations of breathing, and when the mind drifts, bring it gently back.

While there are options and variations here, we usually encourage people to focus their attention deep within the lower abdomen, and the movement of the breath beyond this, potentially into the whole body. While very subtle, it may even be possible to feel movement in your toes, head and finger caused by the breath! Stay present with the gentle pulsating jelly-fish-like expansion and relaxation of the whole body as you breathe.

The chest can also be used, for instance if the lower abdomen has a traumatic association, though we have found this can be anxiety provoking for some, and less grounded. Most people today need to “get down” into the body so the belly is our default, though for complete beginners we just ask them where is easiest (e.g., the nose) to feel the breath and start there.

Usually breath meditation is done with the mouth closed to avoid a dry mouth, though if this is impossible it's OK¹⁴.

Counting the breath can be a good tool to aid concentration. Do make sure you're focusing mostly on the sensations of breath rather than the counting though... because you know,

embodiment :-) And perhaps let the counting go after a few minutes to simply feel and follow your breath.

It is important not to deliberately change the breath... which is actually quite difficult but valuable as a practice in and of itself, developing the skills of patience and non- interference. However, the breath will transform with awareness, slowing down in most cases, and with the pauses in between breaths opening up. Awareness of these pauses can be especially fruitful in our experience.

Inquiries are also possible as a method, but again, keep them felt not theoretical:

- How do I know I'm breathing now?
- Where can I feel the breath most clearly in my body?
- Where else can I feel the breath in my body?
- What is the very edge of where I can feel the breath? Is there anywhere in my body I cannot feel my breath? Where's the limit?
- What is the quality of the breath?

¹⁴ You may find your saliva increases and you need to swallow as you relax out of a mild “fight-flight” mode into a literal “rest and digest” mode every time you meditate. You will also likely get shinier eyes as your blink rate is decreased through relaxation (again, a stress level thing) and your eyes become more moist. On retreats this is very noticeable in most people by day 3-4, as is everyone becoming more beautiful both because of your perception shifting and their chronic stress dropping away! We call this the “retreat spa”...which can be one compounding factor in the silent “retreat romance” where you may have a crush on another retreatant - for several psychological reasons including projection of good feelings. Don't worry, they usually go away.

- How is it to track the rhythm of the breath? The beginning, middle and end. The “seasons” or “cycles” of the breath, if you will?
- How can I connect to the life-delivering qualities of the breath? How is breath life?
- How is it to breathe in harmony with the photosynthesising plants of the planet, they breathe out and you breathe in, and vice versa? A visualisation can help for this one.

The breath is hugely profound in some very non-obvious ways. We encourage you deeper into the mystery and adventure of it!

Touch, breathwork and movement:

- It may be helpful to place your hand(s) on different parts of the body where you can feel your breath – again, the abdomen is a good place, and/or the chest. Or to touch to help “open up” areas to the breath.
- Allow your meditation posture to slightly move / adapt to the in-breath and out-breath, for example noticing how a particular part of the breathing cycle may feel like an invitation to relax or sit up a bit straighter. This can become a subtle wave or pulse.
- While this practice is about NOT changing the breath, paradoxically using subtle holds and elongations can aid this. Experiment.

Pleasure Meditation

Goal: To develop body awareness, concentration and awareness of “like-dislike” in the body. To motivate meditation practice¹⁵. Also to increase awareness of enjoyment, to develop a more enjoyable relationship to the body, and enjoy life more beyond this!¹⁶

Theory:

To become aware of whether you like, dislike or feel neutral about sensations in the body is extremely helpful on various fronts. This is what pushes us around after all, motivating everything from noble actions to severe damaging addictions. One way to get better at spotting such forces is to focus on what is pleasant, which as well as developing the skill of identifying pleasure, will also make you want to meditate more. As we have a perceptual negativity bias anyway, it’s not like you’ll stop noticing pain and discomfort, but you may become more intimate in your day-to-day life with what pleasure feels like in your body and learn to enjoy your body more as a result.¹⁷

¹⁵ This technique is essentially Pavlovian as the very nature of it rewards and reinforces our desire to meditate. You could think of it as “somatic doggy biscuit/treat” meditation :-)

¹⁶ Credit to Shinzen Young for introducing Mark to this one.

¹⁷ I (Karin) remember one mindful moment where I realised I was feeling pleasant but couldn’t quite figure out what the nature of the pleasure was. I tuned into my body and realised it was contentment. This was the first time I noticed what contentment feels like “as a body”. This was years after being told that as a yogi I “should” be cultivating contentment but wasn’t really told how. Since then I recognise it more often and more easily, which seems to grow my level of contentment with life.

Embodied meditation techniques

For those of us prone to the extremes of either addictions and hedonism, or living in a “dry” or Victorian way, this meditation may be especially useful. There’s also a cultural piece here and we sometimes joke that this is the Italian or Brazilian meditation.¹⁸ This meditation can also be excellent to help with food and sex issues, both in terms of excess or “anorexic” tendencies.

Method:

Bring awareness to the physical sensations of pleasure in the body, and when the mind drifts, bring it gently back. Enjoy the pleasure without attachment (contraction) or fantasy.

Follow enjoyment – look for areas that feel pleasurable or at least OK. The out-breath, not standing, belly and jaw release are all pleasurable for most – at least subtly. See how deeply you can enjoy the enjoyment. Let it “soak in”.

Inquiries

As ever, keep them embodied and avoid theoretical thought fancies.

- How do you know pleasure is enjoyable? What is pleasure?
- How does pleasure spread or move?
- How does it impact breathing and muscle tone generally?

- What stops pleasure being enjoyable? Notice any “grasping” tension if you’re wanting to keep the pleasure, or fear that it will leave.
- Is any part of you holding back from enjoying the pleasure?
- Associated guilt or a limit to what is allowable? Is there anything bad in the pleasure?
- How is pleasure the friend of embodiment?

Touch, breathwork and movement:

- Can you create a pleasurable sense in the body with touch or gentle movement?
- If there is grasping or fear, can you identify where this is felt in the body? If there is contraction around that, are you able to let it go?
- Sigh, groan, moan, “yuummm”, make your neighbours jealous, or concerned! For most North Europeans and Americans loosening up around pleasure sounds and breath is liberating

¹⁸ For an especially grueling place to practice this one we recommend the Moulin de Chaves in France, which last time we checked had three types of French cheese to eat and a river to swim in, though we know some other rough places in Scotland, Greece and Tuscany too.

Embodied Kindness Meditation (aka: METTA)

Goal: To become kinder. Also to be less afraid, angry, reactive, impatient etcetera (anything against how things are). It's also a concentration practice to keep our focus on kindness, and a body awareness practice.

Theory:

The cultivation of “universal friendliness” through meditation is a part of many kinds of Buddhism, and there are of course equivalent practices in other traditions. It was however deeply radical when first practised and remains that way in its breadth. It isn't just “love thy neighbour as oneself” – already a huge step – it's love everyone, the animals, the plants, the black death. Love reality itself. This is “friendliness” in the widest possible sense, or if you prefer “well-wishing safety” – not wanting harm to come to anyone or anything. This of course includes oneself. It is not equivalent to tolerating bullshit and bad behaviour in the name of love, agreeing with everyone, or having to hang out with everyone.

Another way to think about metta, is as an aspect of what is now translated a little dryly as “mindfulness”. While concentration practices and “heart” practices, such as metta, are sometimes thought of as separate, this is not the case. Such techniques require concentration (so double up for developing this), and in fact, truly accepting the present moment no matter how it

presents itself, is an act of kindness. They're two sides of the same coin really.

There are several main methods used in classical versions of this technique such as internal repetition of phrases and visualisation. As we present this method, these can be used, but we stress the direct bodily development. Intentionality is however still key¹⁹.

Method:

Start with a brief body scan, emphasising acceptance of what is, and a kind manner of doing it. This is a good base for what comes next and could actually be the complete practice.

Now choose a goodwill phrase such as “may I be happy, may I be well, may I be at ease, may I be safe, may I be free, etc”. Say it to yourself internally in your first language. Nothing too specific, and something that leads to happiness and genuine deep wellbeing for everyone (as later you are invited to use the same phrase for all others). Not “may I eat all the cake and make loads of cash”, or “may my headache go away”. Repeat each phrase internally slowly, while feeling the impact on the body, allowing the words to “land’ after each phrase. Encourage your body to soften and open, to relax and expand symmetrically. Both relaxation and expansion matter.

¹⁹ Credit to Rob Burbea for introducing me (Mark) to how embodied metta could be, and trauma/aikido teacher Paul Linden for some of the aspects of metta presented here.

With practice one can alter one's bodily state directly without the phrases. Other positive states that are not exactly the same as metta can also be cultivated in a similar way.

Phrases can “kick start” the somatic process. Authenticity is a factor here, and connecting with a sincere intention for safety and wellbeing is key. Don't just say it, mean it- as best as you can. Sometimes you have to fake it till you make it though! You may need to find a way of meaning it more in the body (for example a small smile may be useful). You can add a visualisation like radiant light of a colour you associate with kindness from the centre of your chest. Keep feeling and utilising the body to learn to embody kindness. Learn to do what happens naturally at certain times, more consciously, so you can do it more of the time. Simple really.

The next step is to move onto someone you find easy to feel kindness for (but don't have sexual attraction to). Use the phrases (“may you...”) and the bodily aspects again. If visualising, you could imagine light going from you to them.

If you suffer from self-hatred or low self-esteem you may want to do this stage first. Experiment.

You can then move onto a neutral person (maybe someone you see daily but don't know well, like the bus driver on your regular route, or someone you just met). Then a harder person (but go easy here if it is someone you have trauma around). Lastly, include everyone / all beings. If you get stuck or it feels

forced, go back to yourself or the easy person. Keep with the body, this isn't some nice daydream!

If you get “stuck” and it starts to feel inauthentic, or you are just under-resourced, you can always return (and even stay with) yourself or the easy person.

You can also work geographically in visualised expanding circles, or through categories like animals/plants/people, occupations, nationalities, etc. Such things can keep it fresh, allowing you to be creative but make sure to **stay with the body!**²⁰

Enquiries:

- What is the shape of love? How does it feel in the body?
- How can I do love as an action?
- How am I when truly friendly?
- What in my body is not loving? (Replace this with relaxed expansion if you can).
- In what subtle ways am I pushing reality away now?
- If I was truly not hostile what would change now?

²⁰ See also Martin Aylward's book “Awake Where You Are” which has a detailed part on metta and related meditations, and “metta legends” Tara Brach and Sharon Salzberg.

Touch, breathwork and movement:

- Putting your hand(s) on the heart may be useful, as can stroking the chest on upper arms, or even giving yourself a hug (google “self care pose embodied yoga principles” for more).
- Usually softening the “edges” of the breath allowing it to be more circular helps, as does a very, very gentle active encouragement of the in-breath and totally passive letting go of the out-breath
- Extending the hands forwards on sending kindness, and bringing them back towards you to receive it, can also enhance the practice.

Welcome Meditation

Goal: To develop a greater acceptance of the body and sensation. Also a concentration practice. To lead to more equanimity in life.

Theory:

If you are not-fully enlightened, on some level you will be fighting reality and the life of your own body. Sometimes this leads us to ignore sensations, sometimes to push them away, sometimes to distract ourselves etc. This can lead to many harmful things such as emotional denial, being cut off from ourselves, and addictive tendencies to not feel. While these

are understandable survival strategies we develop as children, and judging them is not helpful, it is often useful to practice something else.

Welcome meditation sounds simple, but is a profoundly difficult meditation for many people (if you are really paying attention to how you do not fully embrace everything), and more profound than it may initially seem.

All embodied meditation is about “being with what is”, but this welcome meditation explicitly focuses on this. We also call it “yes” or “full yes” meditation. You may have noticed that while we present six core techniques, in many ways they are different facts of the same thing.

Method:

Feel your body as per the body scan, or any way you like. Say “yes” or “welcome” to yourself, and note any sensations that arise within the body. Do this as an internal “mantra” in your first language. Note the sensation of acceptance – often a release of tension – and consciously replicate this. Examine how you do them so you can deliberately practice them; this is the core technique of embodied change .

If you find yourself resisting, denying or “pushing away” sensation or emotion of any kind, see if you can tolerate opening up and saying yes to it instead for just a little while longer. If you need to “look away” that’s fine. The practice is simply staying with it a

Embodied meditation techniques

bit longer than you might otherwise to grow this capacity. The idea is not to brutally confront everything at once at any cost! “A bit more” adds up and you will grow.

Open, relax, feel. Open some more.

Inquiries:

- What is the body of really saying a full yes?
- Is your yes complete?
- What is it to truly welcome (as opposed to say merely tolerate)? How can you do this in the body?
- Are you fully enthusiastically receptive?
- How does any resistance you might notice feel in the body?
- What do you do in the body when resistance ceases? Can you do this on purpose?

Touch, breathwork and movement:

- Hand(s) resting palms up or out may be useful, and eyes open often helps
- A letting go soft outbreath, and a subtly actively drawing in in-breath (like smelling perfume or loved one) can be useful
- Movements that help you to relax, open and soften will support this





**Embodiment
Unlimited**