EXERCISE: Just Sitting

Many different forms of meditation are practiced all over the world. Some are focused or guided meditations where you either direct your consciousness to focus on a particular point, thought, or word, or you guide yourself on a “journey” through a pre-described set of instructions. Sitting practice is simply sitting quietly in a position that you maintain for the duration of the meditation, without moving much at all, while watching what comes up for you in an accepting, present, and defused way. There is no religious component to it (or at least, there doesn’t have to be), and you shouldn’t have a set of expectations going into it. The goal is to get in touch with the observing self, and simply see what there is to be seen.

The regimen. To do this, we recommend that you find a time in your day when you can consistently dedicate a designated amount of time to practice. How often you want to sit is up to you. The important thing is that you do it consistently. We suggest starting out with three fifteen-minute sessions a week. However, if this is too daunting, or you simply don’t have the time, you could sit once a week. Put aside a certain amount of time, and practice when you have decided to practice. There will always be something that could get in the way and there will always be days when you don’t feel like doing it. Simply look at these distractions and emotions for what they are, and practice when you’ve decided to practice anyway. If you sit only when you feel like it, or when it’s convenient, you will find these periods disappear over time.

The place. It is also important to find a place where you can sit and not be too distracted. The point is not to eliminate distraction so much as it is to allow yourself the time and space to be able to sit quietly still for an allotted amount of time. If the kids come in every five minutes wanting to know what’s for breakfast, this won’t help you move in the direction you want to go. On the other hand, you will never be able to eliminate every distraction, so don’t try. We live in a world brimming over with noise and activity. Part of the challenge of remaining mindful is not to become too rigidly trapped by this activity. Part of the practice is watching yourself when you do get trapped.

The amount of time. Don’t begin by trying to sit for an hour at a time. It is unrealistic to expect you will be able to do this and be successful. It is far more reasonable to start out with smaller increments of time and build up as you go. If even fifteen minutes is too long to sit, then scale back and start with ten minutes, and slowly build up from there. You may want to increase the length of time you sit by two or three minutes every week, until you reach your goal time. Don’t bite off too much more than you can chew. On the other hand, if you know yourself and know it will work to increase the amount of time more rapidly, then do so.

You can set your ultimate goal based on what works best for you, but few Westerners meditate for more than thirty minutes a day. This may seem like a lot of time, but if you start to practice, you may find that you want to do this. Meditation practice can have a dramatic impact on your life. Just do it regularly and see what works for you.

You may want to set an alarm or use some other means by which you can judge the amount of time that you will sit, without having to rely on your watch. You’ll find it is very distracting to look at your watch all the time. Besides, constantly checking the time gives you a very convenient excuse to move, which is unhelpful. Once you have practiced sitting for a while, you’ll find that your body will have a natural sense of how much time has elapsed. Ultimately, you can rely on that. In the meantime, set an alarm.
The posture. Shunryu Suzuki, a famous Zen teacher who lived in this country in the 1960s, often said, "The posture is the practice." Traditionally, sitting practice of the type we are discussing is done seated on a pillow on the floor in the lotus position. While in the lotus position, your legs are crossed. That is, you take your right foot in your hands and place it on your left thigh. You rest that foot on top of your thigh at the crease between your hip and your left groin. Then you take your left foot and place it on top of your right thigh, at the crease between your hip and your right groin. Your spine should be straight, chin pointed slightly downward, while the crown of your head reaches toward the sky. Your arms form a loose circle with your hands also forming a circle of their own, resting one on top of the other, thumbs touching lightly together. Seated in this position there are three points of contact with the ground: your two knees and your bottom via the pillow.

This is a somewhat advanced yoga posture. For beginners, this position is extremely difficult to get into and it is even more difficult to maintain over long periods of time. It takes a fair amount of flexibility to get your legs into that awkward position. In fact, one of the main reasons that yoga was created was as a means to slowly condition the body to be able to sit in this strange position.

We do not recommend that you attempt the lotus position unless you already have some experience with it, or you are naturally very flexible. We describe it as a means of illustrating some important points about the posture you should try to maintain when you practice a sitting meditation.

At the beginning, you will want to make a choice about sitting on the floor or in a chair. We recommend that you sit on the floor if that is possible for you. In the first place, it is an interesting experience to feel this posture. What’s more, it encourages the practitioner to maintain a stable and erect posture (two of the most important components of sitting) by the very nature of the pose. We are so accustomed to sitting in chairs that we tend to slouch and relax in them. It is most important that you maintain an erect posture for the duration of your sit. In a chair, this is less likely to happen. However, if you have suffered some injury (particularly to your lower body) or you feel too much pain when you sit on the floor, sitting in a chair is a legitimate alternative.

There are three important principles illustrated in the lotus position. The first is that you must maintain an erect spine. You should be seated as straight as you can possibly sit. The second is to try to have three points touching the floor, your two knees and your bottom (on top of the pillow). This will ground you in the position more fully. If you are seated in a chair, the three points will be your feet (planted firmly on the ground) and your bottom on the chair. The third is the position of your hands and arms. If you allow your hands and arms just to hang at your sides, it is likely that the position of your spine will be compromised. Hence, you should follow the description above as to how to hold your hands and arms. If you can’t do this, or you don’t feel comfortable with it, place your hands in your lap.

If you choose to sit on the floor, you may want to buy a traditional pillow used for the purpose of seated meditation. These are called zabut. They are sold in many stores that sell Asian goods. If you can’t get one, you can simply use a pillow, scrunched up under your bottom. It isn’t quite as effective, but it works. You will want your bottom to be high enough off of the ground so that your knees naturally contact the floor when you are sitting.

There are three basic postures other than the lotus position that you can choose from. They are the half-lotus, the quarter-lotus, and the Burmese. In the half-lotus posture, you cross your legs and lift one foot onto your hip joint. In quarter-lotus, you sit cross-legged and lift one of your feet onto your knee. In the Burmese posture, you sit on the pillow, with both legs lying on the floor, one in front of the other, in a kind of abbreviated cross-legged position. All of the other points on posture discussed above apply.

If you choose to sit in a chair, make sure that you keep your spine straight. Do not lean your back against the back of the chair, but rather sit a little bit "out" on the chair, and let your body maintain an erect posture without the support of the chair. You will want your knees to be at ninety degrees from
your hip joints. Your feet should be planted firmly on the floor, separated by about the width of your shoulders, with your toes pointing straight out in front of you. Again, all of the other points discussed above apply to this seated position.

The last point about sitting in this posture is this: Be still. Try not to move at all during the duration of your sit. If you find yourself shifting about, bring yourself back to the present, and sit still. Just sitting means not moving, to the degree this is possible. If you practice, you will be amazed at how still you can become.

The practice. The practice is to sit. There is no “goal” to speak of. There are, however, some things to keep in mind as you practice. Remember the exercise you did in chapter 6 where you watched your thoughts drift down a stream on floating leaves? Much of sitting meditation is about practicing this skill. You don’t need to focus on anything in particular and you shouldn’t try. Just let your mind generate whatever it wants to, and watch what it does with the time. Let the thoughts come in and go out. Simply watch them pass by.

Inevitably, there will be times when you get caught up in your thoughts. You may start daydreaming, or you may get trapped in your psychological pain. You may think about what you had for breakfast, what time the kids are due home from school, what movie you want to watch that night, or an ex-girlfriend you haven’t seen in years. As you know, your mind is extremely adept at creating thought. It’s likely you’ll find when you sit quietly that it seems as if your mind’s already natural talents have been amplified. You may have millions of thoughts flowing through your mind, and it’s likely you’ll get caught in them from time to time.

When this happens, simply notice that it has happened, and try to bring yourself back to the present moment and your observing self. Note that you have been in a thought and then return to the here and now. You’ve been practicing this skill over the course of the last two chapters, so you should have some sense of how to do this by now.

You may want to employ some of the defusion techniques that you learned in previous chapters. One technique that is particularly effective to use while sitting is to label your thoughts. As you watch your thoughts pass before your mind’s eye, you may say, “I am having the thought that I had eggs for breakfast,” or, “I am having the feeling that I am sad.” It is also useful to note when you have drifted off, and even the thought that you have drifted off with: “I have been daydreaming about my ex-girlfriend. I am having the thought that I have been daydreaming.”

You might also try using the exercise “Cubbyholing” above. This can be particularly effective while you sit, because it is brief but still allows you to notice your thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations as they come and go.

Follow your breath. Another practice you can add to your sitting meditation is to “follow your breath.” Simply watch your breath come in and go out of your body. This happens naturally. Feel the breath come in, feel the breath go out. Allow it to happen without getting in the way. If you want to, you can count your breaths, from one to ten. Once you have reached ten, go back to one. Just keep on watching your breath.

All kinds of content will come up when you sit. Your anger, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem—all of these may surface. Just watch them come in and go out. As they appear, treat them with kindness, the way you would pat a visiting child on the head in acknowledgment of his presence.

Physical pain. One matter that is very likely to come up while you sit, particularly when you start sitting longer for longer periods of time, is physical pain. Pain can be a very difficult distraction to sit through. Physical pain is an amazing phenomenon. It is remarkable how much your mind can focus on it.
Remember the studies we cited about chronic pain and the willingness to experience it in chapter 4? Trying to get free of physical pain can be as much a matter of experiential avoidance as trying to escape emotional pain, and, indeed, the methods discussed in this book have been shown to be helpful for people who suffer with physical pain (see the appendix). As such, we recommend that you try to sit with your pain, rather than getting up and moving around when you feel you “can’t do it anymore.” If you practice, you will find that you can sit with a lot more than you ever thought possible.

It is very likely that physical pain will be your greatest temptation to move. For novice practitioners, this is almost universally the case. Everyone goes through the pain of sitting at first; even the most experienced meditation teachers have had this experience. Sit with the pain for as long as you can. If you find that you absolutely can’t continue to hold the position, move about just enough to adjust yourself, then resume your sit. If you give up, and avoid the experiences that pain brings, you will condition yourself not to sit at all. If you choose not to sit, that is one thing. If you allow experiential avoidance to dictate this choice to you, then you will have fallen into the same old trap.

Of course, it is necessary to take care of yourself, and if you have a real injury, you should attend to that. Be gentle with yourself. Gently press yourself forward, and continue with your practice.