

Gentle Orientation to Practice

I actually have a five-step process that I follow at the start of all of my meditations to help orientate me in the right way to the meditation. Don't get caught up on these. I find them useful, you may not.

Gratitude:

The first thing I do is bring to mind how grateful I am for the opportunity to practice, for the "me time", for the space and the peace that it offers me, for the insight I get from it, even if it's just "I need to relax more!" It's a remarkable practice and I remember how lucky I am to know about it and practice it. What's more, we're in these remarkable surroundings. There's a lot to be grateful for here.

Motivation:

Secondly, I remember why it is I'm doing this. Sometimes it's for the reasons I've just mentioned, like the "me time", the space and peace, etc. Sometimes it's for "the benefit of all beings", often it's just because I *need* to! I also remind myself that I'm doing this to gain insight. To see the nature of "reality", to see things as they really are. This helps me crank up the curiosity. The investigative mind.

Determination:

It also helps raise determination, which is the third thing. Determination: to be with the breath, to be with the object, to really investigate it and not let it slip by in a foggy haze. To be kind and gentle to myself. To bring the benefits of the meditation to myself and all beings.

Mettā:

Fourthly, I bring the attitude and feeling of mettā to mind, I don't usually formally practice it until afterwards, and mainly only in the evenings on retreats, but I do bring it to mind. Always for myself, and often for others. I'm quite lucky in that I find this quite easy to do, it's a bit of a default place for me, but if it's not for you then it's a good idea to practice it for a couple of minutes. I recommend starting with your benefactor before moving onto yourself. If you have trouble doing it for yourself, try to connect with the feeling of gratitude (as in the first step above) and reflect on how nice it would be if you could feel this for yourself.

Once you've established a feeling of metta for yourself open it up, very gently, to no one in particular. Just float in the feeling and attitude of mettā for a short while, a few seconds will do. Just let it settle in as a default place of kindness for the meditation. If you're a visual type, you might want to imagine you're sitting in an egg of loving-kindness. Make it vivid enough to yourself to set the tone for the duration of the meditation.

Relax and Investigate:

Finally, I relax. I take a few deep breaths and just chill out on each out breath. This is delightful "me time". The outside world is mad and frenetic, this is peaceful me time. I relax into meditation like slipping into a nice warm bath, with candles and oils and petals! The whole works. Spa level bath time! (Who ever bathes like this, by the way? But it is a relaxing image!)

As tempting as it is however, it's crucial not to get too relaxed. Remember why you're here. You are here to investigate "reality" to see the three characteristics of everything. As you relax deeper, increase the investigative mind, the curiosity, at the same rate. This balances the effect of the relaxing and stops you from just falling asleep and toppling over!

So, start your meditations by bringing gratitude, motivation, determination and mettā to mind, and then relax, building curiosity as much as you relax.