

# About the Exercises

The exercises listed below are taken from the courses of the Munich Model and were presented more or less in the same order. In addition, the courses also include material on mindfulness and meditation research and examples of implementation in various professional fields (see “Munich Model”, p. 59 f.).

Presented and practiced sequentially through the teaching units, the various forms of sitting meditation play a central role in the courses. Once all of the sitting meditation techniques have been introduced, participants can choose one that they feel suits them best. The participants then practice this chosen meditation form throughout further teaching units, which always begin with a sitting meditation.

It should be mentioned here that the meditation instructions in this book are intended to give students an initial introduction to different meditation forms and techniques. For further study, it's always recommended that they follow the guidelines and instructions found in the literature related to each of the specific meditations. Students are also reminded that have the option to attend external courses offered through various organizations that teach meditation and that they can further educate themselves through such seminars and courses (see “Risks”, p. 95).

There are four forms of sitting meditation to choose from:

- Breath
- Maranatha
- Focusing between the eyebrows
- So'ham / I am That

If the participants already have meditation experience, they are free to choose whether they practice their own chosen form of sitting meditation or to practice one of the four forms mentioned above. However, in this case the teacher must check whether the respective technique comes from a recognized meditation school and whether it is of benefit to the respective participant in this context (see “Risks”, p. 89 ff.).

The sitting meditations are so important as they give participants the opportunity to focus inwardly and to more deeply experience an inner silence.

An exercise that we usually practiced in the middle of the course comes from the teachings of Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897-1981). The exercise can convey an intensive experience that goes beyond the level of thought (see exercise “What is ‘I am?’”, p. 108 f.).

In addition to the sitting meditations, students have the opportunity to practice the following exercises in mindfulness:

- Mindful everyday life
- Mindful cooking and eating
- Mindful communication
- Body scan
- Loving kindness / Metta Meditation
- Walking meditation
- Sutras
- Sound meditation

These exercises are helpful in that they promote insight into one's own physical, emotional and mental processes and the interactions between them. Although they are very much related to everyday life and are mostly directed outwards, they convey a state of calmness and inner peace. They also play a supportive role to the more inward-directed sitting meditations.

### Test anxiety

Since the summer semester of 2019, workshops in overcoming exam stress have been offered in cooperation with the student advisory service of the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences (see "Munich Model", p. 61). Among the techniques presented, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and mindfulness teacher Thich Nhat Hanh suggests an effective exercise for dealing constructively with one's own fears called: "Entering your own living room". As this exercise has not yet been included in the classes and therefore doesn't appear in the student's meditation journals, it won't be further elaborated on in this book.

The exercise can be found in: Thich Nhat Hanh (2009). *Reconciliation. Healing the Inner Child*. Berkeley: Parallax Press, p. 9 ff.

## Where and when is the meditation done?

Whenever possible, sitting meditation should be practiced in a quiet place without distractions. It's best if possible to arrange a special place for this activity. In this respect, the Catholic priest and Benedictine monk John Main (1926-1982) writes in his book *Word into Silence* "It is also helpful to meditate regularly in the same place and also at the same time every day because this helps a creative rhythm in our life to grow, with meditation as a kind of pulse-beat sounding the rhythm."<sup>1</sup> However, due to a cramped living space or irregular working hours, it's not always possible to maintain such a fixed arrangement. Depending on where you are, there are also suitable periods for meditation in the course of daily life, for example during work breaks, during longer train or bus commutes, or while waiting for appointments. It's important that in whatever place it is, you're not disturbed, for instance, by too much noise or people trying to speak to you as you meditate.<sup>2</sup>

## Posture

There are a number of options in terms of body posture during sitting meditation. It's important that the posture is unconstrained and the body is at ease and relaxed during meditation. Those who have difficulty sitting on a meditation cushion or bench can also sit on a chair. In this case, the feet should be in contact with the floor and the hands should be folded in the lap. The chin is lowered a bit to keep the neck relaxed. It is important that the back, the spine is upright. In exceptional cases, if sitting is not possible, one can also lie down. However, it's much more difficult to remain concentrated and focused when lying down, and there's a high risk of falling asleep.

When sitting on a meditation bench, the legs can be put to the side or slid under the bench. The sideways position of the legs also works when sitting on a meditation cushion. As far as the positioning of the legs is concerned, there is the half-lotus posture, the

whole lotus posture. In the latter, the legs are crossed. First the right leg is placed over the left leg and then the left leg over the right leg. In the half-lotus position, the right leg is placed under the left calf and then the left leg is placed under the right calf. The hands are placed in the lap. When the right outer palm is placed on the left palm of the inner hand, with the thumb tips of both hands touching, one has the “posture of equanimity”.<sup>3</sup> The chin is lowered slightly towards the throat. However, it’s not absolutely necessary to practice the posture of equanimity for sitting meditation.<sup>4</sup>

In class we always practice sitting meditation with our eyes closed. Some forms of meditation, however, are practiced with the eyes half open. In a few cases, some students have reported that they don’t feel comfortable meditating with their eyes closed and prefer to keep them open a little. To do this they choose an external point upon which to fix their gaze, about 1.5 meters on the floor in front of them.

Among the overall range of exercises, there is little emphasis on body movement, apart from walking meditation. There are two reasons for this: first, the available class time is already too limited to allow sufficient time to cover the various topics and mindfulness and meditation exercises; second, there are already meditative-body-oriented courses offered at the university, such as Tai chi and Yoga.

## Concentrated but not tense

When a master once asked his students how they experienced meditation, one student replied that he could hardly concentrate because his leg itched. Thereupon the master said: “Then scratch it!”

I always tell this short story to my students. Afterwards I explain that of course it doesn’t mean that you should always scratch if you feel itchy during meditation. It’s more about not being tense. It’s important to filter out whether the body is just “responding” and demanding attention or whether it really is reflecting a health problem. Just as thoughts can distract, so can the body. If the body is only “restless”, it’s important to learn steadily to ignore it. However, it may be necessary to open our eyes briefly or to slightly change our sitting posture. If, however, we develop headaches, nausea, or dizziness, it’s then necessary to stop meditating. It may even be best to suspend the practice of meditation for a period of time (see “Risks”, p. 89 ff.).<sup>5</sup>

Inner tension and restlessness may arise if, for example, we have to cough or sneeze, but we refrain from doing so because we don’t want to disturb the other participants. If we must cough or sneeze repeatedly, it’s better to temporarily leave the room.

Even an intense urge to swallow can be a source of disturbance for the affected person. Though, usually this urge to swallow quickly subsides. It’s important not to worry or think about it.

The humor already mentioned in the previous section plays an important role here as well.

For me it’s important that in class we feel comfortable and can laugh now and then. It helps to loosen up the atmosphere and reduce any tensions that may exist among the participants. However, we take the exercises very seriously. We are disciplined as we do the exercises, but not tense or strained.

In his book *Mindfulness in Plain English* the Buddhist monk and president of the Bhavana Society, Mahathera Henepola Gunarantana, discusses numerous problems and distractions that can occur during meditation. He also outlines how to avoid them.<sup>6</sup> The section “Breathing Meditation” (see p. 102 f.), describes some of his advice for dealing with the loss of concentration during meditation on the breath.

## Meditation and time

The theme of “time” plays an essential role in the practice of mindfulness and meditation. From the feedback I get from students following the sitting meditations, it’s clear that the participants’ sense of time varies greatly. For example, although the objective time was 10 minutes, the subjective perception of time was often completely different. For some, the “sitting” seemed to be much shorter than 10 minutes, for others time hardly passed.

Another aspect of time refers to the fact that many participants find it difficult to make time for mindfulness and meditation exercises in their normal everyday lives. Although most participants have themselves already experienced the beneficial and relaxing effects of meditation, many are still inclined to prioritize other everyday activities over meditation.

The moments spent in meditation are something very precious. It’s not about how much time passes. It’s a point where past and future no longer play a role; where we come into contact with our inner space – independent of (time) constructs and conditioning. As soon as one becomes more aware of this, it’s easier to make “time” for the practice of meditation.

Time also has a lot to do with *mind-wandering*. In our thoughts, we’re often in the past or in the future. Mind-wandering can be reduced through mindfulness and meditation, and we learn to be more in the here and now again.

The aspects covered in this section illustrate the connection between time and the practice of mindfulness and meditation. And this is why a discussion on time is always an integral part of the courses. Many related questions are thus explored, for example: What is time? Does time exist at all? What are past and future?

The Indian spiritual teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) distinguishes between chronological time and psychological time. For the latter, “It is the interval between idea and action.”<sup>7</sup> If one implements his intention directly, there is no psychological time. To Krishnamurti, what is most important is *the now*, awareness of the present moment. Past and future thus play a subordinate role.<sup>8</sup> Time in this sense is ultimately a human construct, and we are introduced to it in a very comprehensive way no later than when we enter elementary school as children.

Discussions on the subject of “time” are always very stimulating, especially those that take place in the elective course “Stress Management and Meditation” offered through the Faculty of General and Interdisciplinary Studies. As all students of the Munich University of Applied Sciences are able to apply for this course, the participants come from many different fields of study, such as aircraft engineering, mechanical engineering, computer science, tourism, design, electrical engineering, etc. Due to very different perspectives among the disciplines as well as the participants’ own views, there’s a fruitful discourse every time.

In my own long-term practice of meditation I have had the experience that it's often difficult to hold out until the end, especially during longer meditation sessions. So many thoughts were circulating through my head with so much frequency! In particular, I thought about all the things I still had to do and whether I should be doing something else, besides sitting in meditation. I still remained sitting, but the thoughts were often very persistent. Sometimes I also thought about a eating a bar of chocolate as a "reward", which I would usually buy after my meditation. At some point I understood that it's possible to get rid of these thoughts and just sit: not negotiate with the mind! From that moment on, before every meditation I would tell myself inwardly: "In any case, I'm going to sit until the end." In the beginning, thinking tried to lure me out of meditation, to make suggestions to me about what I could do while sitting, later these thoughts faded away. Like a little childen who at some point stop begging for candy because they realize that they won't get any anyway!

## How long do we meditate for?

Sitting meditations can last from a few minutes to several hours (for example during a retreat). As described in detail under "Risks" (p. 89 ff.), one should not overdo it, and in case of longer retreats one should always have previous meditation experience. For one's own practice at home, I usually recommend 15 to 20 minutes once or twice a day. Of course, the duration of meditation also depends on the respective meditation technique. Further information can be found in specialist literature and through schools of meditation (see also "About the exercises", p. 83)

## As a teacher, participate

It's important that teachers are well acquainted with the various mindfulness and meditation exercises and that they have themselves mastered these before instructing their students. Their own regular practice is therefore a prerequisite. Once the exercise sequences have been internalized, it's possible to participate in the practicing the meditation exercises with the students, and to focus attention on the participants as well as the common field of practice. This mutual presence results in an authentic, mindful form of instruction and ensures that a SHARED SENSE AND EXPERIENCE OF BEING can develop.

In this regard, the sitting meditations are particularly recommended. My own experience has shown that meditating together conveys togetherness and strengthens the group

## SOURCES

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<sup>1</sup> Main 2014, p. 11; see also Muktananda 1989, p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gunaratana 2019a, p. 75 f.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ricard 2015c, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> For details on posture see Gunaratana 2019a, p. 57 ff.; Kabat-Zinn 2013, p. 54 ff.; Main 2014, p. 8; Ott 2015, p. 27 ff.; Ricard 2015c, p. 47 ff.; Muktananda 1999, p. xxii f. and p. 25 f.

<sup>5</sup> For guidance on how to deal with physical pain and body distractions during meditation, see Gunaratana 2019a, p. 94 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gunaratana 2019a, p. 91 ff. und 109 ff.; Gunaratana 2019b, p. 69 ff.; Muktananda 1989, p. 87 ff. and Muktananda 1999, p. 22 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Krishnamurti 2010, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*