

the stillness of winter...

Tapping into the season of stillness, Sharon Henshall wraps up warm for a winter walk and looks to nature for mindfulness meditation. What better time for silence, introspection and cool country air?

Barren branches, empty beaches, snow-blanketed silence: all aspects of winter's charm which naturally give rise to introspection. There is, however, an air of anticipation in the stillness of this season. Underground, preparations are occurring; energy is building – ready for a flourish of new life once spring's warmth kisses the earth. And, to be in harmony with that flow of nature, we can use this time to reconnect with our own inner stillness. Our minds and bodies need to slow down and rest, preparing space for fresh experiences to occur and mindfulness to unfold within.

Meditation is often referred to as a useful practice helping still the mind and bring heightened awareness. For many, it becomes a valuable part of a journey to self-discovery, but, for those who haven't been introduced to meditation, the concept can seem a little daunting, mysterious even, and might bring about slight feelings of anxiety. There are many 'styles' of meditation and so for the newcomer it can be a little confusing. Also, many who have never experienced meditation question its validity and wonder whether it is right for them. If you are drawn to find out more, but don't know where to start, why not use the stillness of this winter to delve within and see what you can uncover for yourself?

mindfulness in nature

Nature provides a wonderful backdrop for us during this season, and stepping out of the city brings a sense of inner peace which can be as powerful as sitting in the lotus position on a meditation mat. Mindfulness is often mentioned in the same breath as meditation and this is the precious gift nature can offer us. When stepping into nature, we become more aware of the subtle sounds around us: the gushing flow of waterfalls, the whistles of the wind, the squelch of boots in mud, the scents of the forest and the haunting beauty of birdsong echoing above. Fewer people are out and about in winter, which, combined with much of nature hibernating, makes it a season more conducive toward mindfulness. A stroll on an empty beach, a hike over the hills on a blustery day or an amble through the forest can all induce a state comparable to that of meditation. As we set off, the mind is often full of thoughts... mulling over conflicts, future plans, past conversations, mealtime choices, financial challenges and the like, but, as the walk continues, thoughts usually begin to fall away and a stillness settles, naturally, within. It's a wonderful opportunity to observe what comes and goes within our minds, without attachment and free of judgement: to become mindful.

However, before we step outside for our meditative winter walk, there's a practice which allows us to get to know the mind a little – partly so we can recognise some of the tricks it plays. Find a quiet spot in your home and sit comfortably, ensuring your back is as straight as possible, with pen and paper by your side. Close your eyes and, in silence, count down from one hundred, starting Om 100, Om 99, Om 98 and so on... As soon as a thought arises, open your eyes, pick up the pen and write the last number you counted along with the thought that interrupted the practice. Then, close your eyes and start again at Om 100. Each time a thought arises, go through the same procedure; continue for around 30 minutes. For most of us trying this for the first time, it is unusual to get below 90 and often you'll only make it to 98! Don't feel disheartened; it's not a competition.

take a snap-shot

Once finished, prepare for a snap-shot into your mind by reading back through all those thoughts. See if there are any patterns. Do your thoughts tend more to the past, present or future? Is their focus positive or negative? Is there much

repetition? Were they useful thoughts, or just space fillers? We often think we drive our own thoughts, but when we look at them on paper we recognise that many of them seem to drop into our minds for no apparent reason. Well... other than to keep us out of the moment, busy ourselves with something else, feel badly about ourselves or amplify issues we think we have with others!

But, whatever conclusions you draw from your results, try not to judge yourself - that's just another unhelpful thought, see it rather as an opportunity to become more attuned to your inner world. That awareness is of great significance as the more we become aware of our thoughts the less power they have over us – there's no need to control or stop thoughts, just avoid getting too wrapped up in them. The mind is a useful tool to use for work tasks, for clarification, to understand instructions, create ideas and the rest, but often it runs away with itself and gets busy with negative, unhelpful thoughts. So, by developing an awareness of, rather than giving energy to, those destructive thoughts, we reduce their capacity to influence us. An internal space is

uncovered and those who practice meditation often report of less noise, more clarity and a sense of inner peace.

stepping out

So, wrap up warm and, with a greater understanding of your own mind's workings, step out into the elements. Feel no pressure to achieve anything specific. Being mindful of whatever occurs is a huge step forward on our personal journey. And, if anger, frustration, confusion, self-doubt or any other negative emotions arise, that's perfectly normal too. All emotions are natural, it's just how much weight we allow them that creates problems; observe their presence, but let them go on their way. No doubt there'll be other emotions which follow, but each can come and go without any fuss – much more conducive to harmonious living.

Whatever comes, you'll have enjoyed some crisp country air, absorbed the stillness of winter and, hopefully, feel more at peace with the world. From here, if you're drawn to learn more, you can trust your instincts when searching for a route to gain a deeper understanding of yourself. In nature, the stillness and silence of winter is part of life's flow. For us it can bring an inner space which remains, regardless of what external situations throw our way.



Meditation retreats and courses

Gaia House (gaiahouse.co.uk): Meditation retreats, in beautiful Devon, following the Buddhist tradition.

Vipassana (dipa.dhamma.org): Meditation centre located in Herefordshire offering ten day residential courses for the silent practice of Vipassana meditation.

Tri-Dosha (tri-dosha.co.uk/training/1day.php): Uplifting meditation courses running in June, November and September in London and Manchester.

Holy Isle (holysisle.org): Buddhist meditation courses on offer as well as retreats and short breaks.

Madhyamaka Buddhist Centre (www.madhyamaka.org): Offers courses and retreats, located in Yorkshire.

British School of Mediation (teaching-meditation.co.uk): Intakes in January and September, held at the Isbourne Centre, Cheltenham... for those who wish to teach.