

A phenologist's meditation

Introduction: This guided meditation is designed to support mindful observation of nature. The activities offer open-ended ways to deepen a sense of place, get in touch with the way things are, and let insight arise.

What is phenology:

Phenology is the study of seasonal and cyclical changes in lifeforms, and how those changes relate to climate.

Who is a phenologist:

A phenologist is anyone who notices seasonal changes in plants, fungi, and animals, and wonders how such changes are connected to each other, dependent on local conditions, and tied to climate. They can be scientists who collect and analyze data. They are also regular people who care deeply about a place and build knowledge of its lifeforms through observations.



Prepare: Set aside time—at least ten minutes—for this experience. Arrange matters to create a buffer from everyday concerns, demands, and work. Dress for the conditions. If you plan to sit, bring a comfortable cushion or simple camp chair.

Setting: Find a safe outdoor setting where you can spend time. If being outside is not possible, a view through a window will work, especially if you can look at a garden, bird feeder, or a tree or shrub. If you have options, select a space with minimal disturbances, such as foot and vehicle traffic. The space you choose may influence if you stay still in one place, wander around a small area, or walk some distance. All these styles work, so long as you are comfortable.

If choosing a place feels overwhelming, keep in mind that there is no perfect place, and the place where you are merits attention, even if it does not seem “natural” or “wild”. One tactic is to simplify: look for a tree in your immediate environment that you can get close to and start there. In fact, any kind of plant, such as turf grass, a dandelion, or a shrub, is a good place to start, no matter if it looks dead or alive.

Flow back and forth: The meditation and interpretation are organized in layers. Begin at the top, then flow through the sequence. From time to time, check in with yourself to cultivate restful alertness. Going back to previous layers can help.

meditation

Begin (and re-begin):

Notice your breathing. The breath is an anchor, a set of sensations that are always available to be with and notice. If it helps, break down the breath into its inbreath and outbreath. When you are ready, go to the next layer of instructions. Keep moving through the layers. If at any point you feel distracted, or unsure, return to a previous layer until you feel grounded.

Then, gently shift your attention:

Your senses have spent time noticing inbreaths and outbreaths. For a few breaths, silently repeat the following questions: *Who is here?* and *What are they doing?* These are new anchors for turning your senses to the environment. (Return to this layer any time.)

Next, use your senses to find out who is here:

What is the first plant, fungus, or animal you notice? Go slowly. Let your attention stay a while with the first lifeform you notice. There is no need to know what species it is. (However, you may notice the mind working to identify or label it. For example, the mind tries to categorize it as alive or dead, as plant or animal, as a bug, bird, mammal, or something else.) These thoughts are alright. Notice them without judgment. Notice also, that labels can be useful, but are no substitute for what things are.

One by one, notice what lifeforms are doing:

What is happening in the life of this plant, fungus, or animal today? How much can you learn by sight, hearing, and smell? If it causes no harm, what can be learned by touch? Allow yourself to be restful. Let your attention follow what the environment offers, rather than leading the investigation.

After spending time in this free-flowing sensory intake, the next page offers some ways to interpret and organize what you've noticed.

interpretation

Clues about energy & eating:

If looking at a plant, do you see green leaves that convert sunshine to sugar? If it is an animal or fungus, do you see evidence that it is moving toward or consuming food? Or do you see traces left behind after those activities?

Clues about rest:

If looking at a plant, do you see leaves turning color, falling, or fallen? If it is a fungus or animal, rest often means it is out of sight or difficult to detect. For example, a turtle under ice; a toad burrowed deep underground; a bear or chipmunk in its den; a cocoon. Notice absences.

Clues about reproduction:

If looking at a plant, do you see flower buds, open flowers, pollen, or fruit? If it is a fungus, do you see toadstools, shelf- or cup-like forms, or signs of spores? If it is an animal, do you see different stages of development? For example, do you see eggs, nests, larvae, young, or adults? Do you hear buzzing, trilling, singing, or chirping? Something else? Do you see interactions that could be displays of strength, courtship, mating, or raising young?

Why does it matter?

Noticing who is here and what they are doing is a way to understand that life is sensitive to conditions. For example, seasonal cycles of temperature, daylength, moisture, and other factors influence when organisms gather energy from different sources, reproduce, and rest. When you notice those activities, you get in touch with how lifeforms have evolved to fit in a specific place and climate. The timing of those activities can play a role in the fate of populations: Will they be successful and persist, or will they fail and blink out of existence? If we pay attention, we can develop knowledge about the lifeforms that characterize a place, detect changes in the timing of their life activities, and feel connected to a place's past and future.

Author's note:

The Buddha encouraged people not to accept ideas as given, but rather to come see for themselves. Through direct experience, do ideas prove useful and lead to seeing things as they are? This principle, called *ehipassiko* in the Pali language, informed my process writing this resource. Also, I borrowed words and approaches from the tradition of Insight Meditation.

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