

The following is a post by Upasaka Culadasa to the jhana_insight Yahoo! group from December, 2009. A link is provided to the original message below. Reproduced with permission from the author.

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/jhana_insight/message/2618

Tue Dec 8, 2009 12:11 am

Hello Blake,

You asked about a new emphasis in my teaching.

When I was learning to meditate, I never expected to be teaching, so there is much I could have paid closer attention to at the time if I only had more foresight. Since I have undertaken the responsibility of teaching, it has been necessary to retrospectively deconstruct my own journey. Two things have emerged in this process. One of them is the recognition of those things that I understand now and that would have been very, very helpful to me had I only been aware of them earlier in my own practice. These are things that I try to identify and communicate to my students. The other thing, which only became apparent after I had been teaching for a while, is the degree to which some things are so obvious to me now that I have failed to realize how difficult they can be for someone else to grasp.

What you are noticing is that, yes, there are some things that I have discovered that do need to be emphasized far more strongly than they previously have been.

The particular sentence you referred to is best considered in the context of the entire statement:

"Since the trainability of the mind is entirely dependent upon conditioning involving positive and negative feedback, the meditator is encouraged to take the time to appreciate the sense of being awake and fully conscious and aware whenever the mind returns to being fully present in the here and now after any period of forgetting or mind-wandering. Likewise, the meditator is advised to take note of, savor, and even induce the feelings of peace, contentment, and happiness associated with periods of greater attentional stability and inner calm. Remaining both physically and mentally relaxed is essential to creating conditions that positively reinforce all aspects of the training. Relaxation and happiness perform a specific function in the training of the mind."

As you know, I have always very strongly emphasized that the mental training we call "meditation" **works best through positive reinforcement of desirable mental activities**. The other side of this is to scrupulously guard against negative mental states, like annoyance or disappointment, that tend to arise whenever the mind insists on behaving the way it ordinarily does in daily life.

All of the things that we expect the mind to be able to do in meditation are completely natural and normal mental functions that are already present before we ever begin to meditate. This is also true of all of the mental states, such as *piti* and *jhana*, that we enter into as a result of our practice.

But likewise, all of the activities of the mind that seem to hinder and even defeat our practice are also natural and normal functions that are very much a part of our ordinary daily life, *and in daily life they do perform specific and useful functions*. We cannot reasonably expect to be able by force of will to cause our minds to cease behaving the way they have for almost every day of our lives, especially when those behaviors serve useful functions in daily life. We cannot expect negative reinforcement to overcome such a strong basis of conditioning.

But it is also completely normal for certain mental functions, certain behaviors of the mind, to be active and predominate at some times but not others. So while it is futile to try to suppress normal mental activities, we can certainly condition the mind so as to determine which specific activities predominate under certain circumstances. We can also condition specific mental activities so that they respond more readily to volitional intention. And through appropriate conditioning we can even modify various mental activities themselves in beneficial ways.

Recognizing this, we discover the secrets of training the mind, which is to say *the conditioning of the mind*:

1. Always employ positive reinforcement of those inherent, natural tendencies of the mind that serve us in our practice.
2. Never employ negative reinforcement in an attempt to overcome the completely normal, ordinary, and otherwise useful activities of mind that obstruct our practice.

An example of (1) is feeling pleased and genuinely appreciating the quality of the introspective awareness, that precious taste of *satisampajanna*, that spontaneously arises to make us aware that the mind has been wandering. Never feeling annoyed or somehow trying to “punish” the mind for having wandered is an application of (2).

3. Only use positive reinforcement of their non-occurrence to inhibit those otherwise normal mental activities that are problematic in meditation.

There is a natural sense of satisfaction and success when the mind doesn't become lost in some random thought process. Enjoy it without surrendering to its negative counterpart, which is dissatisfaction when the mind does become lost in distraction. Whenever the attention begins to stabilize and the mind remains in the present, there is always a sense of calm, contentment, and happiness associated with it,

but it is not such a strong feeling that it can't be overlooked, and too often it is overlooked. These are the “mild feelings of joy and peace” that you mentioned having noticed in the earlier stages of meditation. Make sure that you do always notice them. Savor them.

4. There is no Self in control of the mind!

The mind is a collective that operates partly through consensus and partly through the very temporary dominance of one mental process over others. There is no “you” who is the boss of your mind. One part of your mind might wear the big hat marked with the letter “I” for a short period of time, but it has no inherent power to sustain that role. Inevitably, some other mental process operating with a different agenda and from different conditioning takes over and becomes the “I”. This is one of the things meditation teaches us from the very beginning, if we only know to notice. If the part of the mind that is exercising a dominant role pushes too hard, it is displaced from dominance by some other part of the mind. Ultimately, meditation is about training a complex, multi-part mind to operate cooperatively, coherently and consistently, with shared consensus and common goals.

5. Cultivate contentment, happiness, and joy at every opportunity in your meditation, and by every wholesome means outside of meditation as well, and then bring that joy into your meditation.

To whatever degree that the many, many mental processes making us up are functioning in harmony, there will naturally be some degree of joy and happiness. The converse of this is that to whatever degree any of those mental processes are out of harmony, agitated, or resistant to whatever is happening in the moment, that joy will be diminished. At some point the joy and happiness is completely gone, and there is only agitation, restlessness and aversion due to the internal conflicts of the mind.

The more joy and happiness is present, the greater the tendency for these different mental processes to come into synchrony and harmonize with each other. This is the basis for the state of flow that has been studied rather extensively by psychologist Csikszentmihalyi. This also the basis for the feedback loop you mentioned where aversions and restlessness are diminished while joy is increased. And you are quite correct in identifying this as being the same feedback loop employed by Leigh Brasington for entering the “lite” jhanas. Pleasure brings a state of joy, the state of joy is then more conducive to experiencing further pleasure, which then brings more joy, and so on.

In meditation, the collective that is mind creates the causes and conditions for its own internal harmony and happiness. No part of the collective is really opposed to that as a result, but there is a lot of internal confusion about how to get from here to there. Ultimately, the only way that the part of the mind that recognizes meditation practice as the best way is going to convince the part of the mind that believes having a beer and watching TV (or spending money or getting drunk or having sex, etc) is the best way, is through repeated, successful demonstration.

As I believe you have probably heard me explain, *creating a sense of joy and love* is the purpose of the Mandala Prayer that we recite at the beginning of our public meditations on Thursdays. This is also a very explicit part of the purpose of all outdoor walking meditation, and the primary purpose of the walking practice of just “being in the present moment”, which I sometimes also describe as “being in the pleasant moment”. Whenever I guide a sit, I always begin by asking everyone to settle into the body, relax, enjoy the stillness, and feel comfortable and at ease, etc, before directing the attention to the sensations of the breath. All of this is an extremely important part of creating the right atmosphere for successful practice.

Unfortunately, as much as I have always included these components in my teaching, recently I have come to realize that I have not ever emphasized them quite strongly enough. Too often the importance of the above has been either missed or forgotten. You are not alone in often finding yourself creating tension in your practice by making too much effort, or by being too forceful in how you approach the practice.

When I reflect on why this might be so, I find it interesting that we display far more wisdom in the way we train animals like dogs and horses than we do in the way we train our children or our own minds. Successful animal trainers use consistency and gentle firmness rather than force, and positive reinforcement and approval far more often than punishment and disapproval. In that relationship the trainer is in a position of power and dominance while the animal is in a position of submission, and so, unlike with the mind, negative conditioning can be used. Yet even so, skilled animal trainers make only minimal use of negative conditioning, and the purpose of punishment is more often to convey disapproval than to create actual pain and aversion.

Just a speculation, but perhaps to whatever extent our childhood training involved a lot of strict discipline, force, restraint, disapproval and punishment, and strong exercise of the dominance / submission power axis, then perhaps to that extent we are also more inclined to expect to be able to train our own minds in the same way.

In any case, it is not an effective path for mental training. The mind responds very well to positive reinforcement, repetition and consistency, and firm but gentle direction of natural inclinations towards positive results. And that is what I meant to convey in the quote above.

With metta,
culadasa

--- On Sat, 12/5/09, BLAKE B <blake.b@...> wrote:

From: BLAKE B <blake.b@...>

Subject: RE: [jhana_insight] II. Meditative Training Stages 1 - 5 and the "Traditional" Definitions of Ekaggata.

To: jhana_insight@yahoo.com

Date: Saturday, December 5, 2009, 11:43 AM

Hello Culadasa and All,

Thanks for the additional clarification in the stages of meditation. I noticed the following in your message below, and it seems like a new emphasis in your teaching. "Likewise, the meditator is advised to take note of, savor, and even induce the feelings of peace, contentment, and happiness associated with periods of greater attentional stability and inner calm. "

I have found these instructions to be helpful in my own meditation practice to help overcome hindrances and strengthen the Jhana factors. I find that if I open my awareness slightly in the earlier stages of meditation that there are mild feelings of joy and peace, and that giving these feeling some attention tends to strengthen them.

I find that this can be done while still keeping the sensations of breath in the center of my awareness. In fact I have noticed that my attention on the breath needs to be fairly continuous for these feeling to arise, but it is not necessary to have single pointed focus on the breath for long periods of time.

This seems to create a feedback loop where aversions and restlessness are diminished while joy is increased. This is similar to the feedback loop that is used to enter the "lite" Jhana's in Leigh Brasington's system.

William, this seems to produce a similar result to your technique where you are using investigation and attention to strengthen the Jhana factors. This also seems similar to the instruction "Sensitive to rapture he breaths in. Sensitive to rapture he breaths out"

I just came across the following in "Focused and Fearless" p. 99 by Shaila Catherine.

"3. feelings of delight, rapture, and interest that arise through the concentration accrued by sustained attention overcome aversion

4. pervasive feelings of happiness, peace, contentment, and joy overcome restlessness"

"When the mind stays at one point without straying wildly, a feedback loop is created that further enhances stability and happiness. When delight, joy, or equanimity are primary, the mind is less inclined to wander into thoughts of past and future. Consequently, when the first four factors gain strength, the experience of one-pointed focus grows, further unifying the mind with its object."

I have had these feeling of joy and peace arise when focusing closely on the sensations of the breath, and I have also had them arise when doing a more "choiceless awareness" type

practice. They also seem to arise during the "Corruptions of Insight" phase of "dry vipassana" style practice. There seems to be more than one type of practice that lead to the arising of Jhana factors.

With Metta,
Blake