

The following is a series of posts by Upasaka Culadasa to the jhana_insight Yahoo! group from December, 2009. Links are provided to the original messages below. Reproduced with permission from the author.

https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/jhana_insight/conversations/topics/2603

Hello All,

This is the first in a series of five posts that are part of a private communication that arose in response to my "The Power is in the Focus" post of November 11.

I am posting them here on jhana_insight because I believe they are potentially helpful to others with regard to their practice, and also to better understand some of the issues that have come up.

Please don't waste your time with them unless you are interested in the topics. If you are interested, please read them carefully and thoroughly. Alas, it seems you can't teach old dogs new tricks, so these are very wordy and probably not all that easy to digest. I ask your pardon and forbearance, and can only hope that anything of real importance might someday be presented by Frank or someone else in a more understandable format.

Feel free to discuss and debate the content with each other, but I am not interested in spending my time arguing. I will respond to direct questions that are sincere attempts to gain a clearer understanding of my meaning and intent in these articles.

With metta,

Culadasa

I. Traditional Definitions of *Ekaggata* as per Richard Shankman

To quote Shankman, "The Experience of Samadhi", p. 43

"Some traditions maintain that *ekaggata* means being aware of only one point; others that it indicates maintaining a single center in a large range of awareness."

In point of fact, these two represent the extremes of a range of possibilities, rather than mutually exclusive applications. They differ from each other only in terms of the scope of awareness. What I mean by this is that, if you limit the scope of awareness sufficiently, you can certainly think of it as a "point", but the scope of conscious awareness can never be infinitely small, so to the extent to which these 'traditions' differ from each other it is just in terms of the size of the "point". As the Dandy said to the Dame, "Would you sleep with me for a million dollars." "Yes", she eagerly replied, so he said "What about for \$10." "What do you think I am!", she demanded. "We have already established that, madam, now we are just negotiating the price." Practice traditions that quibble over which of the extremes of scope of awareness might be most appropriate would seem to be ignoring both the middle and the possibility that both extremes have some value in their own right.

One thing that is very important to note about both of these positions is that they do agree on the importance of stability of the focal point of awareness, regardless of whether it is the center of a large

range or of a more circumscribed point, and that is why they can be described as “single-pointed”.

There are, of course, practices like *shikan-taza* where no center is defined at all, and although they, too, can lead to unification of mind, I don’t believe they are relevant to this discussion, and I know they are not at all what Shankman had in mind in his discussion of *ekaggata*.

Back to these two extreme points of view, I think it is probably obvious to all of us to us, whether or not it is to those that adhere to the first position, that one of the most frustrating things that a beginning meditator can do is to feel obliged to cease being aware of everything but one object, and one of the least productive things for anyone to do ever is practice meditating with a scope of attention so severely limited that the mind turns off, descends into dullness, and either falls sleep or enters into a somnambulistic trance.

A different kind of mistake, if this is an implication of “large range of awareness” in the second of the two positions, would be to insist that as the meditator advances in skill, there will never be a need gain control over and be able to limit his ‘scope of awareness’, and to focus more tightly on a specific object.

To have the kind of mind that is malleable and wieldy and suitable for achieving Insight, we must train the mind such that it has both the property of stability and intentional control with regard to the focal point of attention, which both of the above approaches suggest in common with each other; and likewise the property of flexibility as well as stability of scope of awareness and the resulting intensity of focus, which is equally neglected by both of the above approaches, at least in the form Shankman has stated them in the quote above. In reality, the meditator must be able to zoom-in and zoom-out as appropriate. The meditator must be able to exclude what is irrelevant to his investigation so that the full power of conscious awareness can be brought to bear on what is relevant, but must also be able to encompass all that is relevant and perceive the relationships that exist between phenomena.

https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/jhana_insight/conversations/topics/2604

II. Meditative Training Stages 1 – 5 and the “Traditional” Definitions of *Ekaggata*.

The mind of a beginning meditator is anything but a unified mind. One part of the mind wants to meditate, while another might want to have a nap, another to ponder some favored project, yet another to go watch TV or engage in a sexual fantasy.

Of the 10 stages, stages 1 through 5 are all about gaining progressively more and more control over the stability of the focal point, the center of the range of awareness, while at the same time there is absolutely no deliberate attempt to limit the overall ‘range of awareness’, or its content, at least so long as it remains in the here and now. There is only one limitation, but it is also a most important one, that the meditator is asked to impose on her attention, and that is for it to remain in the present, in the here and now. And even so, the fact that memories, imaginative projections to do with the future or some other place, or discursive thought processes about the past, future or elsewhere will arise is fully to be expected and accepted, but it is the meditator’s goal to just let them be while not focusing on them, simply ignoring them by redirecting attention until they go away by themselves.

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.

In the first 3 of these 5 stages, the instruction and the primary objective of the practice is simply to train the mind so that one does not completely lose awareness of the meditation object, while the approach to anything and everything else present in the mind is to ‘let it come, let it be, and let it go’.

The potential for Insights, both mundane and supramundane, that are to be gained by NOT attempting to limit the range and content of awareness is enormous, even in the earliest stages.

Beginning in these early stages and continuing all the way through, the underlying principle is the practice of “directed and sustained attention” such that the locus and all movements of attention eventually become entirely intentional. In the first five stages, the process is entirely about directing and sustaining attention with regard to an object that has been chosen to provide a central focus of awareness within an otherwise unrestricted field of awareness.

Whenever a distraction is too strong to be easily resisted in becoming the focus of attention, such as a pain in the body or a jack-hammer outside the window, the meditator intentionally takes that as the new object, the new focus, until either the distraction ceases or weakens in intensity such that the meditator can return to using her original object to define the central focus of awareness.

When the meditator experiences the phenomena often known as ‘monkey mind’, where the mind is particularly agitated and moves very quickly from object to object, resting nowhere for very long, the meditator is encouraged to take a much more expanded primary object, the awareness of the entire body and, if necessary, the other senses as well, at least until the monkey mind settles down. Sometimes we call this becoming ‘grounded’ in the body, and it is up to the meditator whether the practice takes the form of scanning the body (and sometimes the other senses as well), or whole body awareness, or ‘following’ whatever bodily sensation happens to present itself most strongly in the moment. This is once again an application of the principle that we want the locus and movements of attention to be intentional as much as possible at all times, so with the monkey mind, we finesse the situation such that it becomes possible to maintain a strong component of intentionality.

With the first 3 stages we are mainly concerned that awareness of the object not be lost, and so it need not necessarily be at the center of the awareness so long as it continues to register within the range of awareness. Even so, the meditator often finds it helpful to find ways to engage with, take an interest in, and discursively investigate the meditation object so that forgetting and mind-wandering don’t occur as easily, and as a result it naturally comes to be increasingly at the center of awareness over time. This is the beginning of the process of bringing the meditation object permanently to the center of the field of awareness.

With the 4th stage we move more towards intentionally sustaining the object at the actual focal point, at the center of the range of awareness. But this is still done without attempting to impose limitations on the range or content of awareness overall.

In the 4th stage, the meditator is encouraged to focus in more intensely on the meditation object

whenever necessary to combat either a strong distraction or a strong tendency for the mind to begin to drift on its own. On the other hand, he is encouraged to take a less intense perspective whenever the attention rests easily with its object at the center of the ‘range’. But the meditator is advised to never attempt to deliberately exclude or suppress any mental content, only to preferentially maintain the meditation object at the center or focal point of awareness. Not focusing strongly enough for an extended period is very conducive to a kind of mental scattering in which the meditation object is displaced by a distraction or the mind slips into dullness. Focusing too intensely for too long can lead to restless, agitation and even the arising of monkey mind, or else it fatigues the mind which then tends to fall abruptly into a state of drowsiness. It is very much a balancing act, and it is to the practice at this stage that the simile involving the tuning of the lute most clearly applies.

The process culminates with the mastery of the 4th stage and entry into the 5th stage. In the 5th stage, once the object can be sustained at the center of awareness within an unrestricted range of awareness, the practice corresponds precisely to the “*ekaggata*” of the second of the two traditional views described by Shankman and quoted in the preceding article, “maintaining a single center in a large range of awareness”.

While, for reasons that will be explained in a later article, I would agree to a designation of the practice in this 5th stage as *ekaggata* in the Pali language, I most certainly would not use either of the English terms “single-pointedness” or “unification of mind” to describe it.

https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/jhana_insight/conversations/topics/2605

III. Meditative Training Stages 6 & 7 and the “Traditional” Definitions of *Ekaggata*.

In the 6th stage, the meditator attempts not only to maintain a stable focal point or center of awareness, but also to limit the scope of awareness. I call this developing an “exclusive focus”. For the first time the overall field of awareness is no longer unrestricted, and the aim of the practice is to come to a place where the meditator is only aware of what is present in that circumscribed scope of awareness. When she is successful, she has entered the 7th stage. This somewhat resembles the first of the two traditional descriptions of *ekagatta* that Shankman describes, “being aware of only one point”, but with the very important caveat that the scope of awareness may be very large. I do use the English term “Single-pointed” to describe the 7th stage, but I make it very clear that the use of the word “point” has nothing to do with the size of the object, only that it is circumscribed. And the word “single” is intended to indicate the intentional ignoring, the deliberate exclusion from awareness of everything else outside of the intentionally defined scope of the object. During much of the practice in the 6th stage and somewhat less often in the 7th stage, the meditation object is sensations in the entire body. But I do not consider it appropriate to use the English term “unification of mind” to describe the 7th stage, because the mind is still far from being unified.

In the 6th stage, the attempts to achieve single-pointedness as described above are countered by intrusions into awareness that result from the discursive and imaginative and emotional activities of the mind, and also by intrusions of sensory content, particularly sounds and certain bodily sensations that

are unrelated to the meditation object. In this regard the mind is absolutely NOT unified in the sense that a variety of mental processes are still operating at odds with each other, producing instability of attention and requiring effort to sustain the attention. These intrusions are overcome through cultivating increasing stability of both the focus and scope of attention. Contributing significantly to the decreased intrusions of sensations and mental activities is the fact that, through persistently *ignoring* discursive and emotional activities, these tend to withdraw from the field of conscious awareness and more into the subconscious realm of mental activity.

In the 7th stage, although as result of training the attention has stabilized considerably and the intensity and frequency of intrusions into awareness are greatly diminished, the mind still cannot be said to be unified. This is because multiple mental processes and all of the usual processing of sensory information are still going forward at cross-purposes to single-pointed attention, albeit at a largely subconscious level, but any relaxation of vigilance will result in the focus of attention being lost to the distracting thoughts, images, memories, feelings and sensations that once again begin to emerge into full awareness. The subjective experience of peaceful calm, of being in flow is marred by this need to remain always vigilant, and the meditator finds herself longing to be able to let go of this ongoing effort.

It is in this 7th stage, and it is as a direct result of the practice I prefer to call sustained “single-pointed” attention, that something truly remarkable occurs. What happens is that sustaining the single-pointed focus becomes completely effortless. In the tradition in which I was trained, this is called *the attainment of mental pliancy*. There are no longer *conflicting* discursive and emotional processes waiting in the background for the opportunity to emerge from the subconscious to the conscious domains and disrupt single-pointed attention. In the Indo-Tibetan meditation tradition this is also called *pacification of the mind*, and it is an important part of the achievement of mental pliancy. What struck me with such great force upon reading Shankman’s discussion was how totally appropriate the English phrase “unification of mind” was for describing the underlying shift that is responsible for the transition to effortlessness. The occurrence of “effortlessness” and therefore the achievement of “unification of mind” mark the mastery of the 7th stage and the entry into the 8th stage. A further, more complete unification of mind, referred to as the “*pacification of the senses*”, and associated with the full and complete arising of *piti-sukkhā*, occurs during the 8th stage.

https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/jhana_insight/conversations/topics/2606

IV. Relationship between Single-pointedness and Unification of Mind.

As I said in my response to Alex’s query about what I meant by unification of mind:

Non-unification of mind is evidenced by instability of attention in the sense of attention that wavers, shifting between objects rather than remaining steady, a scope of awareness that fluctuates, expanding and contracting so that it sometimes includes more and sometimes less, and a vulnerability to the focus of attention suddenly being usurped by a new and unintended sensory or mental object. Constant vigilance is required to maintain single-pointedness in the non-unified mind, and any lapse can lead to a loss of focus. Various emotional states other than happiness and contentment tend to constantly insinuate themselves into the conscious

awareness of the non-unified mind.

Prior to this shift, wavering of focus and fluctuation of scope is only overcome in the 7th stage through constant vigilance, and the mind remains vulnerable to lapses. As I continued in my explanation to Alex:

Unification of mind is apparent when the collective of mental processes functions more or less in unison, with common purpose, effortlessly responding to conscious volitional intention. This is the mind that the Buddha has described as "malleable and wieldy". It is a mind that is perfect for the investigation of phenomenal experience and obtaining Insight, in contrast to the mind that is wavering, shifting, and divided in its purposes. The power of mindful awareness is increased in proportion to the coherence and unification of the multiple mental processes.

And as Shankman says (p. 43):

“...One-pointedness is single-minded concentration, the ability of the mind to remain, without distraction, unwavering and steady on the fixed object of its attention.

“*Ekaggata* translated as “unification of mind” includes this meaning [my emphasis], but can also suggest another connotation. Rather than a mind fixed on one object,... in this state the mind itself is unmoving, not the objects of experience, as all mental faculties come together.

(NB: In the above quote from Shankman I have omitted the phrase “in which the experience of changing phenomena is lost” because it is misleading. While this phrase may be technically correct in context in that the Vissudhimagga and some other methods may actually recommend that the experience of changing phenomena intentionally be lost, it is a false statement in that, while it may be *possible* for it to be lost, it is completely unnecessary that the experience of change be lost, and from my point of view it is definitely a fault in the practice and the quality of mindful awareness should awareness of change in fact be lost. With the quality of attention available in single-pointed focus, even without unification of mind, the awareness of change in the observation of the sensations of the breath can lead to powerful Insight into *annicca*, the relationship between *nama* and *rupa*, and *sunyata*. I have previously discussed precisely these Insight events in this same context.)

Further to Shankman’s interpretation of the relationship between one-pointedness and unification above, as I said in my original “The Power is in the Focus” post:

Once unification of mind has been achieved, single-pointedness can be abandoned in favor of some other type of practice, such as, for example, some form of choiceless awareness; Mahamudra practice [my emphasis newly added]; the transition from the 1st to the 2nd and subsequent 'deep' (VJ) jhanas and dhyanas (which I have described on this board in the past); or the formless 'lite' (SJ) jhanas. Alternatively, the yogi can *continue to use single-pointed attention* to a fixed object, and engage in, for example, the practice of the 'Union of Vipassana and Samatha'; the unification phase of the 'Meditation on Emptiness'; or the cultivation and investigation of the first four 'light' (Pa Auk) jhanas.

And also in my response to Alex:

Unification is particularly characterized by the quality of effortlessness. Once unification is achieved, there is no further necessity for attention to be confined, either to a particular object or even any object at all. The attention may be moved at will, continuously or discontinuously, slowly or rapidly, from one to another of any and all possible objects, mental or sensory. Alternatively, it may rest in a state of openness allowing various objects to arise and pass away

without being moved by them. Because there is no longer any effort required to sustain the quality of attention and mindful awareness, the mind is entirely free to investigate the nature of reality, unfettered by the need to guard against distraction or dullness. The affective state of the unified mind is one of ease and happiness [my emphasis newly added].

And so, to summarize the relationship between single-pointedness and unification of mind, as I stated in my original “Power... Focus” post:

Single-pointedness as a tool, a device, a method, a technique is closely related to unification of mind but it is *not the same thing as unification of mind*. Richard Shankman realized as much when he closely examined the Suttas, and actually mentions this in his book, *The Experience of Samadhi*, but it is a point that can be easily overlooked. When we discussed this he made the point more strongly in person than he had in the book. From my point of view, single-pointedness is best thought of as a method or way of practicing that can bring about the state or condition of unification of mind.

And as I also stated in my original post:

I can state unequivocally and with complete certainty that the practice of single-pointed concentration on an object such as (but not limited to) the sensations of the breath is one of the most powerful and rapid methods *I am aware of* [my emphasis newly added], if not THE most powerful and rapid method currently available, for accomplishing the unification of mind.

There are those who have suggested that unification of mind can be achieved by methods other than single-pointed practice, and I do not deny that as a possibility. There are further suggestions that certain so-called “open-awareness practices” may be easier and more effective than single-pointed practice, although I have yet to find any clear description of these practices in a testable form. I do not deny that as a possibility either, and have long been in search of easier and more effective methods of practice than those we are already familiar with, because they will be of great benefit to sentient beings everywhere. But until I become aware of convincing evidence of a better approach, I have no choice but to continue to assert that single-pointedness is the most effective approach that *I am aware of*, while at the same time investigating other possibilities.

https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/jhana_insight/conversations/topics/2607

V. Ways to Understand and Translate the Pali Term “*Ekaggata*”.

With regard to *ekaggata*, according to the PTS dictionary, '*gata*' is most commonly used either as 'going' or as 'gone' or sometimes as 'has gone' or 'went'. My knowledge of Pali is not good enough to understand quite how the two tenses are distinguished. '*Eka*', of course, means 'one', so the most literal translation would be "gone to one" or "going to one". There is also no obvious way to determine, by looking at this compound word by itself, whether when it is applied to the mind it means attention that is going or has gone to one object, or whether it means that the mind itself is going or has gone to a state of oneness, of unity.

There are 4 possible ways to take *ekaggata*.

1) Where one assumes that it is in the present tense and the 'one' referred to is a single object of attention, it can be taken to mean: the mind that is 'going [repeatedly] to one [object of attention]', and

this would quite readily apply to stages 1 through 4. *As has hopefully been made clear, none of these stages corresponds to either of Shankman's "traditional" positions as to the meaning of ekaggata.*

2) Placing it in the past tense, and 'one' still referring to the object of attention, it can be taken to mean the mind that has 'gone to [and remained on] one [object of attention]', and this would describe stages 5 through 7. *Stage 5, as previously mentioned, corresponds to Shankman's 2nd traditional position regarding the meaning of ekaggata, that of "maintaining a single center in a larger range of awareness". Stage 7 corresponds to the Shankman's 1st traditional position with regard to the meaning of ekaggata, that of "being aware of only one point", and the 6th stage constitutes the transition between the two.*

3) In the present tense and where 'one' refers to oneness or unification, it can be taken to mean the mind that is 'going to one[ness]', and could therefore be applied to the entire process of training, all eight stages that culminate in unification at stage 8 and the two further stages of refinement of the unified mind as well.

4) In the past tense and still referring to oneness or unification, it can be taken to mean the mind that is 'gone to one[ness]', and would therefore apply specifically to stages 8 through 10, also to the 2nd and higher of the jhanas that take a state corresponding to stage 6 as Upacara (the jhanas I have called 'ultralite'), and to all of other jhanas that are launched from a state corresponding to stage 7 or above.

In terms of the actual training of the mind, there seems to be no great need to distinguish between these different possible meanings of the Pali word *ekaggata*. The attention that is 'going repeatedly' to one object as a result of the intentional directing of attention, and is intentionally sustained on the object for longer and longer periods of time, will eventually become trained such that, once directed it has 'gone and remained'. Likewise, the mind that is undergoing this training is at first 'going towards unification', and then once unification has been achieved can be said to have 'gone to unification'. Understood in this way, *ekaggata* can be used quite comfortably to describe both the process of training the mind in attentional stability and the unification that results.

The English translations, on the other hand, lack the versatility of meaning that *ekaggata* has in Pali. Even if we accept the designation of 'single-pointed' as equally adequate for all of the different "traditional" interpretations that have been given to it, it still only applies to some but not all of the stages in the process of training the mind, and does not apply at all to the result. On the other hand, 'unification of mind' adequately describes the end result of the training, but is not at all applicable to the process by which it is achieved. I am afraid that we are once again confronted with the inadequacies of the English language for an accurate rendering of a Pali term. *Ekaggata* reminds me of both *dukkha* and *piti* with regard to implying a breadth of meaning that is lacking in any simple English translation. I am comfortable with *ekagatta* as it is used in the Pali texts, but it is essential that the English translation be appropriate to the context in which *ekaggata* has been used, and wherever 'single-pointed' is chosen as the translation it must be qualified somehow so that it indicates which of the "traditional" interpretations is meant.