

PART II: THE STAGES LEADING TO UNINTERRUPTED CONTINUITY OF ATTENTION TO THE MEDITATION OBJECT - THE PRACTICE OF ATTENTION & AWARENESS

NB: Whenever it is useful to make specific reference to a meditation object, I will use the sensation of the breath as the object of meditation. This is because 1) it is my personally preferred meditation object for this kind of practice (development of concentration and full-minded awareness), 2) it is probably the most commonly used meditation object among those who will read this dissertation, and 3) it is the specific meditation object mentioned in the only Suttas dealing with meditation methods (the Buddha seemed to prefer it too). So when specific techniques are described, they are breath meditation techniques, but I believe it will be easy to see how these same techniques are readily adapted to other meditation objects.

THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO PART OF THE PROCESS DESCRIBED BELOW THAT IS SPECIFIC TO A PARTICULAR MEDITATION OBJECT – IT IS EQUALLY APPLICABLE TO ANY MEDITATION OBJECT. Likewise, except where otherwise specified, I will usually assume that the location for observing the sensation of the breath is in the vicinity of the tip of the nose, but that is completely incidental to the discussion, and everything that is said would apply equally well to observing the sensation of the breath at the abdomen or anywhere else.

1. ESTABLISHING A PRACTICE.

It may seem trivial at first to include “Establishing a Practice” as an important stage in meditative training, but I don’t believe that it is. And there can be no question that mastery of the stages that follow can never occur until there has been mastery of this one.

We must train ourselves to sit down and practice regularly. Once sitting, we have to train ourselves to actually do the practice, rather than engage in some more interesting or entertaining mental activity. When either dullness of mind or interesting thoughts, images, or ideas arise, we need to resist the temptation to indulge in them. ***Diligence*** is the skill we must develop to overcome this obstacle. The more you meditate, the easier it becomes to do, until you begin to look forward to sitting in practice. Thus we may regard the simple act of sitting down and placing the attention on the meditation object as the first stage of meditation.

I have found that most people when they first approach meditation are keenly intrigued by all they have heard or read, and they are eager to learn this mystical technique that promises so much. Because of this, their first attempts are often very rewarding, they experience a lot of calm and feelings of satisfaction, and they don’t have too much trouble following the instructions. But after a little while, when the novelty wears off, they begin to be frustrated that the mind is so uncontrollable, and the practice begins to seem more like hard work with little in

the way of a positive outcome. Laziness and procrastination assert themselves strongly. If they are practicing on their own, it becomes difficult to find the time to sit, and the excuses for not doing so multiply until they overwhelm any hope for regularity of practice. In a retreat setting, as boredom and procrastination set in, the meditator begins to indulge in daydreaming and fantasies, planning various kinds of projects, rehashing past events and conversations, or thinking about letters or books they will write someday, almost anything to avoid what has become a difficult and unsatisfying task. They may decide they are not suited to meditation, that it was a mistake to even begin, and in retreat they will start trying to come up with a plausible reason for why they should leave.

Modern life is extremely busy, and most people have relatively high levels of stress in their lives. Often dealing with that stress is a part of the motivation for learning to meditate in the first place. And a large part of the stress of modern life is the pressure of various commitments upon one's time, which results in mental fatigue. It is not unusual for someone to sit down to meditate, and as soon as they begin to slow down and relax they realize they are exhausted and would rather go to sleep.

What does one do, then, when the thought of sitting down to meditate begins to seem like just another demand on one's already limited time and energy? How do we make ourselves endure the disappointment of trying to concentrate on a meditation object and failing, when all we really want to do is spend an extra hour in bed, or space out in front of the TV, or have a hot bath?

The challenges that are presented in this first stage of meditation can be described as disappointment, doubt, boredom, laziness, procrastination, sloth, fatigue and torpor. They can all be summed up simply as a natural reluctance to do something that is difficult, boring, and unrewarding. What kind of solutions can be offered to the meditator for these problems?

First and foremost, the meditator must do whatever he or she can to increase their motivation level. This means reminding themselves of why they decided to meditate in the first place, reflecting on the admirable qualities of experienced meditators that they know, recalling the benefits of meditation and specifically how they expect to benefit personally from meditation.

Then, when they have generated good motivation, they need to take some practical steps to facilitate regular practice. Some useful methods include

- identifying a suitable time and place for daily practice, reserving that time for meditation and nothing else, and making a commitment to always practice at that time;
- making what ever changes are necessary in their lifestyle to assure they are neither excessively agitated or tired when they sit down to meditate;
- and, if possible, meditating with someone else so that their commitment is not just a private matter.

Begin with a period of meditation that is reasonable and that you can succeed at. For the first week or two, 15 to 20 minutes may be as much as you can manage consistently. A full hour at least once each day is the goal, but it is better to work up to that rather than try to do too much to start and then become discouraged. Ultimately, the most important thing one can do to overcome these obstacles that all beginning meditators face is to *just do it*. Nothing else is as fast and effective in resolving these problems. Within a very short time of regular practice it starts to become easier and more gratifying.

Over time I have developed a 6 step **Preparation for Practice** that I recommend to new students. The idea is to memorize these 6 steps and go through them as the very first thing you do upon sitting down to meditate. They are:

1. Review your reasons for meditating, your motivation and purpose.

It doesn't matter what brings you to the cushion, it's not about good or bad reasons, it's only about being consciously aware of why you are meditating, now, today. When feelings of restlessness and resistance arise during your sit, there is nothing better than having your reasons for practicing clear in your mind.

2. Decide what you want and expect to accomplish in today's

meditation. Knowing the stages of meditation gives us a powerful tool to use in our practice. What stage are you in, and where does your effort need to be focused today? What are the problems you have encountered recently? What is a reasonable goal for today's practice in terms of your progress up to now? It is important that we have goals and that we maintain an expectation of progress. Goals help to provide us with discipline in our practice. It is most beneficial to set realistic expectations of ourselves, and then strive diligently to succeed in them.

3. Remind yourself to be satisfied with whatever you do accomplish.

Having just emphasized that meditation requires diligent effort and goals, now we need to remind ourselves that we must be gentle with ourselves as well. It is not possible to meditate every day and always be able to say we have made progress compared to the day before. Sometimes we experience plateaus where very little seems to change over many days or weeks of meditating, and sometimes we can't seem to achieve even the same degree of concentration that we had two weeks or two months ago. It is always important to remember that there is no such thing as a "bad" meditation, except possibly where one just doesn't bother to make the effort. On a day when the mind is easily focused, we are enjoying the results of our previous training. On a day when dullness and agitation are obstacles to concentration, we actually have the opportunity for training the mind in a more powerful way. Mental training is much like physical

training in that, when the effort required is greatest, that is when the most is accomplished.

4. Resolve to practice diligently for the entire period of your sit, regardless of how it may go. Laziness and procrastination can become serious problems while we are sitting, especially when our practice is not going well. We may be tempted to daydream or plan, or spend time thinking about interesting ideas that arise that are more appealing than the meditation practice. Far too many problems are solved, projects planned, and fantasy conversations carried out by beginning meditators. Continuing with the practice under these circumstances, with no concern for how successful you may or may not be in your attempts to concentrate, can be one of the most powerful things you do to permanently overcome problems of resistance to practice. This is a good opportunity to discover just how very trainable the mind really is.

5. Prepare yourself for the difficulties and distractions you are most likely to encounter. You have already prepared yourself to deal with the possibility of reluctance to practice. Now it is time to prepare for other obstacles that may arise. Are there affairs in your life that are attractive and important to you, and therefore strongly present in your mind? If so, acknowledge them and accept that they will probably intrude, and resolve to set them aside for another time if they do arise. Are there conflicts, fears and animosities, or judgments and annoyances on your mind? Worries and regrets? Doubts? Do a quick scan of the state of your current situation to identify the things that may come up as distractions in your meditation. Acknowledge them and resolve to set them aside. You may not entirely succeed, but you have set in place an intention not to let them dominate your mind. These five categories: reluctance and resistance to practice, worldly attractions, negative thoughts and attitudes, worries and regrets, and doubt, pretty well encompass all of the serious *mental* obstacles to concentration that you will encounter. You will never catch them all in advance during this Preparation, but this process of review and resolve will also prepare you for the ones you don't think of.

6. Review your posture.

- Are your legs, knees and ankles comfortably placed? You may need support under your knees or some other aid to help you to sit comfortably, and don't hesitate to use these – it doesn't matter in the least whether you look like a yogi or not, but if you are not comfortable you will be spending a lot of time meditating on pain and discomfort. It is not necessary to sit cross-legged on a cushion on the floor. Sit in a chair if it works better for you.
- Are your back, neck and head in reasonable alignment, front to back and side-to-side?

- Are your shoulders even and your hands level with each other so that your muscles are in balance?
- Your lips should be closed, your teeth slightly apart, and your tongue against the roof of your mouth – this is the most natural placement for these body parts.
- Your eyes, whether open or closed should be angled slightly downward as though you are looking at something several inches in front of your nose, like when reading a book. Once again, this is the most natural position. The position of your eyes will change during meditation, but start out with them in this position, and then whenever you happen to become aware of your eyes for any reason, return them to this position. This will minimize feelings of tension in your forehead and face.
- With your lips closed, you will be breathing through your nose. The breath should be natural, not controlled or forced in any way. If during your meditation you should happen to feel like you are controlling your breath, or that it is not happening naturally, don't worry about it. If you don't actually *intend* to control your breath, that is all that matters. And there is absolutely no reason to intentionally control the breath – don't worry, it won't stop.
- Are you relaxed? Scan your body for any signs of tension, and let it go. All the action is going to happen in the mind, so the proper state of the body is like a lump of soft clay – solid and stable but completely pliant.

This will go a long way towards minimizing physical distractions during practice.

By the time the meditator has finished performing this little review, the mind is usually already pretty well settled. When a new practitioner says “I seem to be spending the first 10 or 15 minutes of meditation just doing the Preparation, is this a problem?” I ask them how the rest of their session goes afterwards. That usually answers the question right there. The goal at this point is to establish a consistent practice free from deliberate dissembling and avoidance, so it doesn't really matter how much or how little time is spent on the Preparation, because the Preparation *is meditation practice*, and anyone who would use the Preparation itself as a form of procrastination is probably too immature in their intentions to succeed anyway. Depending on the individual, this deliberate process of preparation for meditation will be useful all the way through *at least* the 4th stage of meditative training.

Summary

*The instruction for this stage is: Choose a time and a place, make whatever arrangements are necessary, and **just do it – every day**. Perform a mental preparation for meditation at the beginning of each session. Don't indulge in other mental activities during the meditation session. The actual practice that is performed once one sits down and after the mental preparation has been completed is what is described for the stages that follow.*

What constitutes mastery of the stage of Establishing a Practice? When the meditator hasn't missed a daily practice session for several weeks (except when absolutely unavoidable), and when the meditator rarely if ever indulges in procrastinatory 'time-passing' activities while waiting for their practice time to end, then they have mastered this stage.

This stage is the most difficult to master of all the ten stages in terms of the effort that is required. Although it can be mastered in a few weeks, it is not unusual for people to spend years as sporadic practitioners without mastering this first essential stage. Most of the time when meditators seem to be stuck in stages 2 or 3 it is because they haven't mastered stage 1. They lack regularity and consistency in sitting down to practice, and they lack diligence when they are sitting.

Noticeable benefits of practice: A decreased tendency for procrastination in general, and less resistance to performing uninteresting or unpleasant tasks.

2. INTERRUPTED CONTINUITY OF ATTENTION TO THE MEDITATION OBJECT**A. THE SITTING PRACTICE**

After the initial novelty wears off, which can be anywhere from ten minutes to a week after starting to practice, the novice meditator typically finds that they can rarely attend to the meditation object for more than a few seconds at a time. If they are using the breath as object, they will find that they often lose the attention to the breath after as few as 3 or 4 breaths. Not only that, but once they notice that the breath has been forgotten, they will find they have been thinking about other things for several minutes, at the least. This is what is meant by interrupted continuity of attention to the meditation object, and in the beginning it can be quite extreme.

The goal at this point is two-fold:

- to recognize as soon as possible that the mind has wandered, and
- to prolong as much as possible the period of attention to the meditation object.

When we have achieved this goal, we will have mastered the 2nd stage and will enter into the 3rd stage.

Counting as a method of stabilizing the attention.

One method for working with this problem is *counting the breaths*. The object of this exercise is simply to be continuously aware of the breath for ten consecutive breaths. This is usually done right at the beginning of the sit, and is the first thing the meditator does after completing the Preparation for Meditation. The standard used for continuity of attention is very simple at this point – not to entirely miss either an inhale or an exhale, and not to lose count. We are not looking for exclusive focus on the breath, and such a thing is not possible at this time, so it is not even a consideration. There will be awareness of all kinds of things other than the breath present in the mind at the same time one is trying to be mindful of the breath. Also, at this time we are not looking for perfect continuity of attention, just that there is awareness of most, if not all, of each in-breath, and most, if not all, of each out-breath. Nor are we looking for non-verbal, non-discursive, or non-conceptual observation at this point, so we can talk to ourselves and think about the breath as much as we want while we are observing it, as long as we don't completely lose awareness of it or lose track of the count. When we do lose the awareness of the breath or when we lose track of the count, which will happen frequently, then we start over again at *one*.

It doesn't matter whether we assign the number to the breath at the beginning of the breath cycle, or at the end of the cycle, or even somewhere in the middle. But interestingly enough, it does make a difference what we identify in our minds as the beginning of the breath cycle. Most people will automatically tend to identify the beginning of the in-breath as the beginning of the whole respiratory cycle and the end of the out-breath as the end of the cycle. This feeds in to the tendency of the mind to move on to something else when the task at hand is finished, so the mind will typically wander during the pause between the out-breath and the next in-breath. But if one thinks of the beginning of the out-breath as the start of the breath cycle, this is less likely to happen. As trivial as this seems, it does actually seem to make a difference, at least for some people.

Sometimes, after having started over many times, the meditator still hasn't succeeded in counting ten breaths. When this happens it is time to change the goal to five breaths. The rule is 'never more than ten, never less than five'. By the time the meditator has entered the 3rd stage, it will never be necessary to settle for less than 10 breaths.

Now, when we have succeeded in counting ten (or perhaps five) consecutive breaths without losing awareness of the breath, *we are done with counting*. There is really no value in continuing to count past ten breaths, because counting quickly becomes automatic, and so then we are dealing with the same problems as we would be without the counting, so counting past ten really has very little purpose. Some of the literature on meditation includes elaborate breath counting practices, and while it is possible that might be useful for someone with a serious ADHD condition, I have never known anyone for whom anything more than a simple counting of ten breaths was particularly useful.

On the other hand, during the first few days or weeks of doing this practice on a daily basis, it may occasionally be helpful to do another ten-count during a meditation session if the mind is particularly agitated. The process of counting breaths at the beginning of each sit need never be discontinued. A meditator with mastery of the 10th stage will typically be in effortless concentration before the tenth breath has been counted. And throughout the development of the ten stages, the initial period of counting provides the meditator with valuable information with regard to the current state of agitation of her mind, and the topics that are most likely to arise as distractions during that sit.

Learning to Recognize that the Mind has Wandered

When the meditator has succeeded in counting either ten or five breaths, then they cease to count and continue to observe the sensation of the breath. For the meditator in the 1st, 2nd or 3rd stages, they will very soon experience a moment of realization that they have forgotten the meditation object. It may have been forgotten for fifteen minutes, or only long enough to have missed a single in-breath, but it has been lost nevertheless. This is a very important moment, and it is important not because the meditation object has been lost, but because ***the meditator has become aware that it has been lost.*** This moment has the quality of an awakening, a realization, and that is indeed what it is. It is to be cherished and encouraged. It is, in fact, ***introspective awareness*** in its most fundamental form. It is a moment in which the meditator not only becomes aware of what they are doing, but also what they had intended to be doing and that they are doing and what they had intended are not the same. It is a sort of micro-epiphany.

Strengthening introspective awareness, reinforcing it and developing it, is the secret to everything that follows. And the way to do this is very simple. Whenever we have this experience of realizing that what we are doing is not what we intended to be doing, then we rejoice in that realization. We absolutely do not allow ourselves to be annoyed or self-critical about the fact that the mind has wandered. This isn't even especially relevant at this stage. What is important is that ***we came to be aware*** that the mind wandered. Being pleased at this will have the effect of making that same awareness occur more often and more frequently. The result will be that the periods of mind-wandering become shorter and shorter as we become aware of them earlier and earlier. So this is how we will accomplish the first part of our goal, recognizing as soon as possible that the mind has wandered. Notice that there is no force involved, no rigid discipline, no burdensome effort – just simply rejoicing at a wonderful, naturally occurring experience.

You can even think of the mind as though it were a child you are training. *Reward it for doing what you want it to do, and it will do it again!*

After we have given ourselves a mental pat on the back for having noticed that the attention had strayed from the meditation object, it is time to gently direct the attention back to the object. But there can often be a reluctance to give up the

objects of our strayed attention in favor of the meditation object. This is where discipline and diligence come in, denying ourselves the indulgence in some other mental activity in favor of meditating. So this deliberate *directing of attention* is an important training, too.

If we reflect on the normal behavior of the ordinary mind, the objects that conscious awareness usually attends to are those thoughts and sensations that are either novel or of greater intrinsic interest as compared to other simultaneously available thoughts and sensations. In other words, attention is most often 'drawn' or 'led to' or 'captured by' its objects rather than being *intentionally directed* to them. In meditation, on the other hand, the training cultivates the capability of *directing the attention* towards a specific meditation object regardless of its particular intrinsic interest or novelty, and *sustaining the attention* on that object in spite of the tendency for the attention to be drawn or led away to other more appealing objects.

Thus *the ability to intentionally direct the attention to an object* to which it is not naturally drawn is an important mental faculty that we are cultivating every time we gently return the attention to the meditation object after it has wandered.

Think of the ability to intentionally direct the attention as though it were a muscle. Every time you use it, it gets stronger!

Sustaining the Attention on the Meditation Object

The second part of our goal is to prolong as much as possible the period of attention to the meditation object. We do this by engaging as fully as possible with the meditation object, and in breath meditation this is accomplished through a systematic series of mental exercises that can be described as *following the breath*.

The typical behavior of the ordinary mind is to jump to something else, looking for something of interest and importance as soon as the current object of attention loses its interest. And what could be less interesting than observing the sensations of the breath after having already observed a few hundred or thousand or hundred thousand of them? And at the same time there are all these other processes going on in the mind, essentially saying things like “Hey, what are we going to do about this knee that is starting to ache”, or “Hey, we forgot to mail the rent check yesterday”, or “Hey, I wonder if that attractive guy in the marketing department is already dating someone.”

We need to find a way to occupy the attention with the breath. The best way to do this is through *active engagement* of the mind by giving the mind a task to perform that requires close observation of the sensations of the breath, then to *intentionally sustain the attention* on the sensations of the breath while we seek to complete that task. To begin with, we can set ourselves the task of trying to identify the exact moment when the in-breath begins, the exact moment when the

in-breath ends, the exact moment when the out-breath begins, and the exact moment when the out-breath ends. This engages the mind by giving it something to do.

And at first it can be a rather difficult task. It all seems to happen so quickly, and sometimes the events themselves are so subtle! And at the same time, there are so many other things thrown up by the mind, vying for the attention!

As before when we were counting breaths, we are not looking for non-verbal, non-discursive, or non-conceptual observation at this point, so we can talk to ourselves and think about the breath as much as we want while we observe it, generate mental images to help us follow the breath cycle, anything it takes to sustain attention on the breath as we follow and investigate it. The meditator is encouraged to think to themselves 'beginning, end, beginning, end' if they are of the verbal type, or visualize some image like a circle expanding and contracting with the breath if they are of the visual type, or of some kind of motion if they are a kinesthetic type, or anything else at all that helps them to be able to clearly identify those points in the breath cycle.

But it is amazing how quickly the awareness sharpens up. This change in perceptual acuity is the beginning of training in *increasingly full-minded awareness*. And as the degree of full-minded awareness increases, the mental words and mental images and so forth cease to be useful, and indeed become obstacles to the precise observation of the parts of the breath. And so, unless the meditator mistakenly clings to them as a result of faulty instruction, they will naturally fall away as their usefulness ends, although this may not happen completely until well into the 4th or even the early 5th stage.

Now, attention is normally sustained on an object for only as long as that object continues to exercise sufficient intrinsic interest relative to other concurrent potential objects, or until its novelty has been exhausted through examination. As the awareness becomes sharper and quicker, and once the mind has succeeded in clearly identifying the beginning and end points of the in and out-breaths, interest is going to tend to fade, and it will be discovered that attempting to sustain the attention on the breath by simple will power alone is not very effective. So the mind must be given *further challenges* in order to *remain actively engaged*. While closely observing and distinguishing between the end of the out-breath and the beginning of the in-breath, it will have become obvious that there is a brief pause between the two. Likewise, there is a pause between the end of the in-breath and the beginning of the out-breath. The next goal in following the breath is to observe these two pauses clearly, and with the added objective of noting which is longer and which is shorter. We can subsequently further increase the challenge of the task by examining the nature of the *changing* sensations during the processes of the in-breath and the out-breath, and comparing the two. Are the in- and out-breaths the same length, or is one longer than the other. When there is clear awareness of all of the parts of the breath cycle, and of the differences

between the various parts, then the task can be expanded to include noticing relative changes over time. Are the in-breaths and out-breaths longer or shorter than they were earlier? If one was longer than the other before, is it still the same one now as it was then? Are the pauses between them longer or shorter than they were before? Is the longer of the two pauses now still the same one that was longer earlier?

So the process of actively engaging the mind with the breath through the exercise of following the breath can be expanded as necessary as the intensity of awareness improves. But it should not be expanded until it becomes necessary, and this exercise of *following the breath* will be used right through the 4th and into the 5th stages, so the meditator should not expect to need to go much beyond simply identifying the beginning and end points in this present stage.

Think of sustained attention and full-minded awareness as being like habits. Active engagement in following the breath is the way we develop them, and with repetition they become stronger, until over time they become the norm!

Strengthening Introspective Awareness

As was explained earlier, introspective awareness is a special case of full-minded awareness, special in the sense that it attends to and notices what the mind is doing in the present. It can also be strengthened by adding more challenge to the basic task we have given it. After a little bit of practice, the meditator will have noticed that when that special moment of realization occurs where introspective awareness lets them know that they have forgotten the meditation object, the distracting thought that they had been engaged with just disappears, and that they often can't even remember what it was. So to make this aspect of awareness somewhat more 'full-minded', we can work to be able to identify, but only in a general sort of way, the nature of the distraction *at the moment we became aware of it*. (If the period of distraction has been very long at all, there have probably been a series of associated thoughts leading up to the last one, hence the 'wandering' aspect of mind-wandering, but we are only interested in identifying the most recent thought in the chain.) We don't want to become involved with the distracting thought process itself, and we certainly don't want to create a new distraction by analyzing it, so the way we identify it to ourselves needs to be something quick and simple, like "thinking of lunch" or "remembering last night" or even just "thinking" or "remembering". The point is to just increase the level of our basic, immediate awareness, so there is no need at all to be very exact. And then we gently direct our attention back to following the breath.

B. THE NON-SITTING PRACTICE

Walking meditation

Meditating while walking is a powerful practice in its own right as well as being a very useful adjunct to sitting practice. Alternating between the two also gives the body a chance to recover from the effects of sitting motionless long periods. In

the context of a daily practice, walking meditation can be done immediately prior to sitting, in which case it helps to create a mind that is already quite calm from the very beginning of the sit, or it can be done immediately after sitting, and then it has the advantage of bringing a high level of focused attention to the walking practice, or it can be done at any other time of day. During retreats or on days set aside for more extensive practice, walking and sitting alternate with each other.

In this practice, the sensations in the soles of the feet and in the muscles and tendons of the legs play approximately the same role as the sensations of the breath in the vicinity of the tip of the nose during the sitting meditation. They provide an ever present anchor for the attention. Walking, like breathing, is an automatic process, and it is possible to do a practice very similar to the breath meditation using the sensations produced by walking, but at this stage we will do a simpler and more relaxed version of the walking meditation.

To begin, it is a good idea to practice walking at a variety of paces, faster and slower, while mindfully observing the differences between them. When we walk at a 'normal' pace, as when we are unhurriedly moving from one place to another, the process is almost entirely automatic and requires almost no attention at all. When we walk very slowly, there is not the same fluidity of movement, and almost every detail of the process must be consciously attended to and deliberately controlled. When we walk quickly, we need not attend to the process of walking so much, but more awareness of the surroundings is required and more attention to choices of direction, obstacles, and footing.

For the practice at this stage, after experimenting with walking at different speeds, choose a pace that is slow enough to be able to observe the changing sensations in the soles of the feet, but fast enough that the process of walking is still automatic. The primary objective for now is to *remain in the present moment*. It is the **present moment**, rather than the sensation of walking, that is the actual meditation object. The sensations are just an anchor, an aid to remaining in the present, and a focal point for returning to the present.

The best location for this practice is either outdoors or in a large open space, and where you are not likely to be interrupted. Preferably there will be a pathway that can be followed without needing to be concerned with choosing a route and making decisions about where to go, or else one can simply select a path in advance.

Now begin walking while attending to the sensations in the feet. It is not necessary to restrict the attention to those sensations, so let the mind observe and explore whatever presents itself. The only goal is to *remain in the present*. When introspective awareness alerts you to the fact that you are not in the present – either because you are thinking about the past or the future, or about some other place, or else you are engaged in abstract thought or analysis – then inwardly celebrate that awareness and the reawakening to the present. When you are

remembering, you are not in the present, when you know you are remembering, then you are in the present. Now gently direct your attention back to the sensations associated with walking and continue your practice. There will be sounds that attract your attention, there will be visual objects of interest, there will be sensations due to sunlight and shade and the movement of air, there will be odors. Feel free to experience and examine any and all of these, so long as you remain in the awareness of the present moment. In fact, it is an essential part of the practice that you do explore these experiences and fully engage with them. Discover the present. And whenever the current object of your attention passes away or ceases to be of interest, return to the sensations in the feet.

This practice is quite relaxing and pleasant, and very easy to do. But you will recognize that you are nevertheless cultivating all the same faculties of mind as during the sitting practice of attending to the breath. The attention is being intentionally directed, either to the sensations in the feet or to objects of interest that present themselves. The faculty of introspective awareness is being exercised and positively reinforced on every occasion of recognizing when the mind has left the attention has moved away from the present moment. The attention is being sustained through the application of full-minded awareness of whatever it has been directed towards.

Summary

The instruction for this stage is very simple: Follow the sensation of the breath at the tip of the nose. Try to notice the exact moment the in-breath begins and ends, and the out-breath begins and ends. When you notice the mind has wandered, feel good about noticing. Gently direct the attention back to the breath and resume following the breath.

So here are the key ingredients of the process:

We train the mind and cultivate the occurrence of **introspective awareness** through positive reinforcement, by feeling pleased whenever it occurs. We strengthen the intensity of introspective awareness by challenging ourselves, by expecting a little more from that moment of awareness when it arises.

We strengthen our ability to **intentionally direct the attention** by simply doing so over and over again, gently by firmly.

We strengthen our ability to **intentionally sustain the attention** by simply sustaining it, over and over and for longer and longer periods of time, and we do this first by **counting**, and then by **actively engaging** the mind in the investigation of the breath in the exercise called **following** the breath.

We improve the intensity of awareness by simply exercising our capacity for **full-minded awareness** over and over again and for longer periods of

time, and we do this by providing the mind with more and more challenging tasks, both in its investigation of the breath and its noticing of distractions.

If one reflects on this, there can be no ‘unsuccessful ‘ meditation session, unless one just quits trying of course. After all, the more often the mind wanders, the more opportunities there are for training the mind in introspective awareness, and the more often we get to exercise our ability to direct the attention as well. The more that agitation tends to draw the mind away, the more we get to practice and develop our ability to sustain the attention. The more that dullness clouds our investigation of the meditation object, the more opportunity we have to learn how to increase our awareness.

Learning to meditate is like learning to play catch. At first you often miss the ball and have to go chase it, and your tosses are not very good either. But you just keep doing it, feeling good about it every time you make a good catch or a good toss, and through nothing more than simple repetition you come to be good at it. And it is fun to do as long as you don’t get caught up in judging your performance. Before you know it, you catch every ball as soon as it comes, and toss it right back.

If the meditator practices diligently every day, it will not be very long before introspective awareness has strengthened to the point that periods of mind-wandering are comparatively brief, there is facility in quickly (but gently) directing the attention back to the meditation object, and the attention can be sustained on the meditation object with great acuity of perception for relatively long periods of time.

When, in the duration of a one-hour sit, it can consistently be said that the amount of time the attention is focused on the meditation object is distinctly longer than the time that it has been forgotten, and when the typical period of sustained attention is measured in minutes while the periods of mind-wandering can be measured in seconds, then it is fair to say the meditator has mastered the second stage and has entered the third stage.

Noticeable benefits of practice: More relaxed, less agitated.

3. EXTENDED CONTINUITY OF ATTENTION TO THE MEDITATION OBJECT

A. THE SITTING PRACTICE

When the attention remains on the meditation object long enough, the meditator now has the opportunity to start examining the nature of this new ‘mental space’ that arises through concentration. What she becomes aware of is that there is a continuous stream of activity, in the mind on one hand, and in certain of the sensory channels (the body-tactile sense and the sense of hearing in particular) on

the other. And even though the meditation object is at the *focal point* of the attention, there is a simultaneous awareness of all these other things going on as well, sort of in the periphery or ‘background’ of conscious awareness.

And sometimes it will be noticed that, even though it has not yet been lost and forgotten, it is the meditation object that has slipped into the background of awareness while some other thought or sensation has taken over the *focal point* of the attention!

Gross Distractions Leading to Forgetting the Meditation Object

We can think of the presence of these other thoughts and sensations in our awareness as a ‘*scattering*’ of attention, and so let us call the thoughts and sensations themselves ‘*distractions*’, since they are scattering the attention that would otherwise be exclusively focused on the meditation object. When they are in the background, we can call them ‘*subtle distractions*’. When they take center stage, we can call them ‘*gross distractions*’.

Now, in this third stage we do not yet have continuity of attention to the meditation object – we still lose it completely from time to time – but the periods during which this happens will have become much shorter than they were in stage 2. So short, in fact, that not too much ‘wandering’ of the mind from one thought to another by association has occurred, and so quite often the thought in our minds at the moment when introspective awareness alerts us will be the very *same thought that succeeded in taking us away from the breath* in the first place. And if we have gotten very good at noticing what the distracting thought was in that moment (you will remember that we added that as an *additional challenge* in the preceding stage to help us cultivate introspective awareness), we may even recognize it as having been present as either a gross or subtle distraction *before* the meditation object was lost (although not always).

The goal of this stage is essentially the same as it was in the last stage, except that we now we want introspective awareness to alert us *before* the meditation object is lost instead of after. At first it often seems that the mind has just gone from the meditation object, seemingly in a flash and with no warning. But at other times we will have noticed that particular thought as a gross distraction before it took us away. And this is what we want to reinforce – we want to cultivate a sense of being pleased (*and never annoyed!*) every time we recognize that the distraction was one that we had already been aware of.

Now we are going to have to set ourselves to working on two tasks at the same time. First of all, as before, we want to follow the breath and investigate it with as much full-minded awareness as we can generate. But at the same time, we also want to *become aware of the process by which the mind comes to lose this primary object of awareness* so that we can prevent it from happening.

Up until now we have waited for introspective awareness to just sort of spontaneously appear, and then reinforced it when it did. But now we need to start *deliberately invoking* introspective awareness rather than waiting for its spontaneous appearance. What this means is too *very lightly* turn our awareness upon our mind's activity every now and then, just 'checking-in' to see what is happening. And every now and then when we check-in, we will discover that gross distraction is present.

Once we have recognized the presence of a gross distraction before it has captured our attention completely, we should be able to keep it from taking it away at all. And how do we do that? Well, simply identifying its presence as a gross distraction will often be enough to cause it to dissipate, but if that is not enough, or if it keeps returning, then strongly redirecting our attention back to the breath and sharpening up our attention to the details of the breath as closely and strongly as we can will usually work. It's a very simple process, and all we have to do is keep repeating it. The frequency with which we notice the distractions and tighten up our attention to the breath will increase, and the periods between interruptions of continuity will become longer.

In the 2nd stage we had to learn a lot of new skills. But in the 3rd stage we just need to get better at using them, and learn to apply them in a more consciously deliberate manner.

Falling Asleep During Meditation and Strong Dullness

But there is also a new type of problem that becomes evident as soon as we start to experience longer periods of attentional stability – dozing off. (This can also sometimes be a problem for stage 2 meditators, but doesn't usually arise until they are well advanced in stage 2. Rarely, it won't appear until stage 4). Unless the meditator is lying down or sitting in a comfortable chair, lapses into sleep are usually very brief, because within a few seconds of falling asleep the postural muscles relax and the head nods or the body starts to fall, and then the meditator awakens with a sudden jerk as muscle reflexes pull her back upright again. (And this is a very good reason for not meditating in a recliner chair or while lying down!)

Falling asleep is a sort of ultimate state of dullness and is characterized by the total absence of full-minded awareness. Unconsciousness and full-minded awareness are opposites. Not too surprisingly, sleep is usually arrived at through a process of progressively decreased awareness and increased dullness.

This is a good opportunity to investigate dullness. If we have just dozed off and jerked back awake again, then within a short time we can feel the dullness settling back down onto us again, like a heavy cloak. One will notice that sleep is immediately preceded by drowsiness, and that with drowsiness the dullness is so strong that, although the awareness clings to the breath, there is no intensity, the details of the breath cannot be clearly observed, and it is like something seen

through a dense fog. And one will also notice that drowsiness is preceded by a very comfortable, very stable state in which the breath is still being followed, and many of the more obvious details are still evident, but without the same *intensity* or *vividness* that was present before.

This dullness is also a sort of '*scattering*' of *attention*, but rather than being scattered to other objects of awareness as it was with gross and subtle distractions, it is scattered to a nebulous vacuity of non-awareness. When there is drowsiness, we can call it '*strong dullness*'. When the details of the breath can still be followed but *vividness of perception* has been lost, we can call this '*subtle dullness*'. By comparison with the full-minded awareness we are potentially capable of, most people spend most of their lives in varying degrees of *subtle dullness*. Thus we may speak of someone with a high degree of full-minded awareness as being '*Awakened*'.

Before we get into the specifically meditation-related aspects of sleep and drowsiness we need to address those causes that have nothing to do with the meditation itself. If the meditator is not adequately rested or is excessively fatigued due to physical or mental stress, the meditation is inevitably going to be plagued by problems of sleepiness that will be resistant to the methods described below.

1. It is absolutely essential to get an adequate amount of sleep each night. A number of recent scientific studies have strongly suggested that *most* people in modern North American society do not get enough sleep. If you are serious about meditation you will need to get enough sleep. Experienced meditators who have mastered the higher stages don't need as much sleep. But you will have a very difficult time becoming one of them if you don't get enough sleep in the early stages of practice. Regard getting a good night's sleep as an important part of your practice!
2. It is not usually a good idea to meditate late in the evening before you go to bed, too soon after engaging in strenuous physical activity, shortly after eating, in the early part of the afternoon, and obviously (one hopes) after having consumed alcohol or medications that dull the mind.
3. The best time of day for most people to meditate is shortly after waking up in the morning and before they have eaten. The next best times of day are in the morning anytime before about noon or 1:00 PM, and in the late afternoon and early evening.
4. Some meditation retreat leaders believe in enforcing a short sleep schedule. Although I understand the reasons for this, I disagree with them. If you are in a retreat with a short sleep schedule and are having a difficult time with sleepiness, you are advised to take advantage of any free periods

to take a nap. At least then you will know that what you are dealing with is mostly strong dullness, not simple brain fatigue.

Sleep is always preceded by strong dullness (although strong dullness does not always lead to sleep). So to overcome the tendency to fall asleep in meditation we must recognize the presence of dullness before it causes us to doze off, we must learn something about its causes, and then we must learn what the antidotes to dullness are so that we can apply them as necessary.

It is, of course, introspective awareness that will alert us to the presence of dullness. So when we invoke introspective awareness by very lightly turning our awareness upon our mind's activity every now and then to 'check-in' for gross distraction, we must look for evidence of strong dullness at the same time.

There is a reason why dullness happens just as concentration starts to improve. Firstly, the mind has turned strongly inward, and we are conditioned to associate this inward turning with going to sleep. But also, to the degree that we have succeeded in taming the active mind and calming its agitated state, we have also caused a drop in the energy level of the mind. So we need to keep the mind sufficiently engaged so that too much inward-turning doesn't take us into sleep, and we must also re-energize the mind, although not too much.

Once the meditator has dozed off once or a few times during a session, it can sometimes be very difficult to shake off the remnants of strong dullness enough to be able to work with its arising. Working with the *arising* of strong dullness can be very productive. But struggling against strong dullness while it is already present doesn't work so well. Here are a few suggestions:

- Take three or four very deep breaths, filling the lungs as completely as possible, holding for a moment, then exhaling as forcefully and completely as possible.
-
- Fully tense all the muscles in the body as strongly as possible until you begin to tremble, count to 10, then relax. Repeat several times.
-
- Stand up and do a walking meditation for a few minutes.
-
- Worst case only, get up, splash cold water in the face, then go back to practicing.
-
- If there is a strong temptation to just indulge in sleep (dullness can be quite seductive), remind yourself that life is short, the time of death is unknown, meditation leads to liberation, and there are other times to sleep.

One or the other of these methods should suffice to overcome the strong dullness enough to be able to work with its re-arising in an effective way. When you have

succeeded, you will probably be able to notice a distinct shift, a noticeable increase in alertness. All of these interventions are very stimulating, and they also turn the attention strongly outward, so try not to do more than necessary or you will only create a state of agitation! Keep in mind that the intent isn't really just to get rid of dullness, although if it does disappear entirely that is fine, but rather to get to a place where it can be investigated and worked with.

Balancing the inward turning mind

The meditator needs to try to notice how strong dullness develops. Remember that one of the causes of strong dullness is an excessive inward turning of the mind, so one of the things that will happen is a decreased awareness of the surroundings, ambient noise, etc. Of course, one of the attributes of the concentration that we are hoping to achieve is that we are no longer distracted by such stimuli, but that will be achieved through gaining intentional control over the attention, and through calming the activity of that part of our mind responsible for monitoring the senses, *not through the shutting down of sensory input of the kind of associated with going to sleep.*

The distinction between these will become clearer as we progress through the subsequent stages, but at this point the meditator just needs to accept that dulling of the awareness of the environment is an important manifestation of the onset of strong dullness. When this is noticed, it is good for the meditator to expand her awareness, first to include the whole body, then any sensations on the skin due to movement of air or air temperatures, then sounds, then to the whole room, and perhaps even to the building the room is in or the neighborhood the building is in. Try to do this without losing awareness of the breath, then dwell in this state of expanded all-encompassing awareness for the space of several breaths, and finally bring the focus of awareness back to the sensations at the tip of the nose.

Now follow the breath and return to the practice of observing the details of the breath as closely as possible. You are looking for the point of balance between inward directedness and outward directedness. Continue to follow the breath while waiting for the next time dullness arises and provides a new opportunity to repeat this exercise!

Balancing the energy level of the mind

The second important factor in dealing with dullness is the energy level of the mind, and the mind is energized through *intention*, whether it is intention that arises from desire and aversion, or consciously generated intention. In the case of maintaining the proper energy level of the mind in meditation, it is *consciously generated intention* that is important. We all know that intention manifested as will, determination, resolve, etc culminates as motivating energy, and we also know how its opposite (submission, confusion, doubt, uncertainty, indecision) saps the mind of energy. We experience it all the time in our daily lives, and people have made fortunes teaching other people about this in motivational seminars about goal setting and clarifying intentions. It is this same psychological

principle of intention begetting psychic energy that is involved in the cause of dullness and antidote for dullness.

In the present situation, we have been reining in the mind, restraining its natural tendency to seek stimulation and interest by constantly bringing it back to the meditation object. There is a famous simile of a young elephant being trained by being tied to a stake by a rope. At first the elephant lunges and charges in every direction, trying to escape the tether. When it realizes it cannot, it lays down and goes to sleep. As with the elephant, we need to stimulate the mind to wakefulness once again, but within the context of the meditation practice. We do this by renewing and strengthening the intention to investigate the breath, and to clearly observe all of the parts of the breath. The meditator must form the intention to closely observe the sensations of the middle of the in-breath even as they try to observe the precise point of beginning of the in-breath. Likewise, they must hold a strong intention to observe the precise end-point of the in-breath, even as they observe the sensations of the middle of the breath, and so on. This will re-energize the mind.

Following the breath in silence

This brings us back to the process of following the breath, and of course to the problem of successfully sustaining the attention on the breath so that it is not forgotten. By now the meditator will have noticed that a lot of the mental activity in the ‘background’ of their awareness is in the form of words, an inner dialogue that is tending to track everything that is going on. At first they will have found that talking to themselves was helpful in keeping the attention more fully engaged with observing the details of the breath, but by now they might also have noticed what an incredibly slippery thing this self-talk is! Like quick-silver, it can flow from the investigation of the breath to something else that is related but different, and then to something else, and so on and so on. There are some obvious advantages to discursive thought at this stage in the practice, but this tendency of *verbal* thought processes to drift is a disadvantage.

This is because words are symbols for concepts. Some concepts are very simple, and others are complex, constructed in turn out of more simple concepts. The mind can manipulate these verbal symbols at a much, much faster rate than it can manipulate the concepts that they represent, especially the more complex concepts. Who has not at some point been amazed at the speech that flowed out of their mouths and then thought to themselves, “where did that come from?” Words and speech have bequeathed upon us the ability for our minds to function very rapidly in thinking, because in all mental processes, not just mathematics, logic and engineering, symbols can be manipulated so much more easily than the objects they symbolize.

So at this point, discursive thinking is still helpful, but thinking in words allows the thought processes to move a bit too quickly. One of the things we can do to

help keep the mind from generating distractions out of our discursive engagement with the meditation object is to do it non-verbally, stop the words.

B. THE NON-SITTING PRACTICE

Walking meditation

Continue the walking meditation as before, doing at least ½ hour per day. By now you will have become much more skilled at remaining continuously in the present for longer and longer periods of time. Whenever introspective awareness alerts you that the mind has departed from the present moment, further enhance the quality of that introspective awareness by noticing where the mind had gone. Being lost in a speculative analysis of how kamma works, for example, is not being in the present, but being aware that you had been engaged in such reflection and identifying the topic *is* being in the present. Start regarding these awarenesses of departures from the present in the same way you do any other sensation that arises as a part of your experience of the present, and engage them as you would an interesting sound and so on, identifying and examining them, then letting them go.

Most probably there is also lot of inner dialogue going on as well, a lot of self-talk and commentary on what is being experienced. In this stage of the practice, just as with the breath meditation in the sitting practice, it is time to practice *being in the present silently*. When introspective awareness alerts you to the verbal ruminations of the mind, just let them go and turn your attention towards the sensory components of your current experience. This does not mean that you are trying to stop thinking or to stop thoughts from occurring, just that you will let go of the words. It might be something of a revelation to explore what it is like to observe and examine and think without words. Enjoy that process of discovery!

Mindful awareness of the breath

Throughout the day there are many occasions when we have a minute or a few minutes when we are not really occupied because we are waiting for something – waiting in a checkout line, waiting for a traffic light, waiting for a play to begin, waiting for someone to call back, etc. Every one of these occasions is an opportunity to practice mindful awareness of the breath. Recognizing that one of those moments has come available is a manifestation of introspective awareness. It is a moment when we awaken to what we are actually doing in the here and now, when we become aware of the intention we have set ourselves to do this practice, and when we recognize that the opportunity is present. Inwardly rejoice at this arising of introspective awareness, then direct your attention to the breath, and sustain the attention on the breath while following the breath as closely as you can with as much awareness as you can for however many breaths the opportunity permits.

Summary

The instruction for this stage is as follows: Follow the sensation of the breath at the tip of the nose. Try to notice the exact moment the in-breath begins and ends, and the out-breath begins and ends, and whatever further details of the breath are helpful in fully engaging the mind. Without trying to stop the thoughts, do try to minimize their verbal component. When you notice the mind has wandered, try to also be aware of the nature of the distraction it was engaged with. Feeling good about having noticed the wandering, gently direct the attention back to following the breath. Deliberately check-in with yourself from time to time to notice that you are still on task, and gently return the breath to the focal point of awareness as necessary.

So here is what has been added to the process at this stage:

An **enhanced introspective awareness** that is able to identify the nature of the distraction that has taken the attention away from the meditation object.

An understanding of how the **attention is scattered** by **distractions**, that can be either **gross or subtle**, and by **dullness** that can be either **strong or subtle**.

The habit of very lightly checking-in, or deliberately invoking introspective awareness. This intentional application of introspective awareness developed in stage 3 can be described by the word '**vigilance**'.

It is this vigilance in combination with habituation to sustaining the attention on the breath that culminates in uninterrupted continuity of attention.

Over and over, whenever the mind wanders, it is quickly noticed, and the attention is gently returned to the breath with a (deliberately cultivated) feeling of satisfaction. It comes to be quite automatic. While the attention is on the breath, it is observed and investigated diligently, always trying to improve the perceptual clarity of awareness. Secondly, the habit is cultivated of very lightly 'checking-in' to make sure the attention is still fully focused on the breath. Next, an appropriate correction is made if it is not. After a while, all three of these come together. The habituation to following the breath is well developed and strong enough that the attention to the breath is never lost, even though other thoughts, internal dialogues or drowsiness may be strongly present, because these distractions and dullness are always noticed and corrected before the breath is forgotten.

Vigilance allows the meditator to recognize gross distraction and strong dullness *before* the meditation object is lost. Then, with a feeling of satisfaction, the meditator gently returns the breath to the focal point of awareness. If the scattering is due to gross distraction, she tightens up her attention on the details of the breath. If the scattering is due to strong dullness, she first expands her

awareness, then strengthens her intention, moment by moment, to clearly observe the unfolding of the breath.

And then comes the time that the attention to the breath is never lost! There will be a marvelous satisfaction in knowing that one has actually achieved uninterrupted continuity of attention. This marks the real beginning of skilled concentration. The meditator can now do something that most people cannot do, something that at one time they may perhaps have thought they themselves were not capable of. Once attained, *the ability to sustain the attention in meditation* can go along way towards dispelling doubt in one's own abilities, in the teacher, and in the teachings.

Noticeable benefits of practice: Improved attention and less distractibility, most noticeable when listening to someone else speak, in conversation, or when reading.

