

Contemplative Fitness

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Introduction

There is a kind of human development that has gone largely unnoticed in the West. Even as mindfulness meditation makes its way into hospitals, schools, and outpatient treatment facilities, our culture doesn't yet have an over-arching concept of how meditation is relevant to our lives.

Meditation is much more than stress reduction. Meditation changes your brain. Do it enough and it will change your life.

In this book, I hope to present a conceptual framework in which to place meditation and related contemplative practices, and to show how this particular branch of human development is as essential to a human life well-lived as psychological health, emotional maturity, or physical fitness. In fact, the various kinds of mental and physical fitness work together such that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts; one step forward on any of the lines of human development makes it easier to access any of the others.

Just as we can speak of physical fitness and mental fitness, we can identify a branch of human development that we might call *contemplative fitness*. Contemplative fitness has to do with the kind of growth that comes from meditation and related contemplative practices. Its ultimate manifestation is a kind of persistent well-being that is independent of external circumstances. At its essence, contemplative fitness is the art of being OK. And from the platform of being OK, the stage is set for the very best of humanity to emerge. When you are OK, an enormous amount of energy is freed up to find out what it means to be truly human. When you don't have to work so hard to protect yourself, you have, perhaps for the first time, the luxury of considering the needs of others. It is from this stable place of equanimity and self-acceptance that we can learn to access levels of sensitivity, creativity, spontaneity, and empathy that we didn't know existed. One aspect of contemplative fitness has to do with what has often been called spiritual awakening or enlightenment. This phenomenon is real, and it happens to real people in our own time; it happened to me, and the first part of this book describes that process. But rather than thinking of this awakening as a panacea, a magical wand to wave away our difficulties, we can take a more nuanced view, a more realistic and balanced understanding that takes into account what we now know about psychology, physics, and neurobiology. In order to embrace the benefits of contemplative fitness, we don't have to believe that at some point, if we meditate enough, we will behave impeccably, glow in the dark, or suddenly have access to the 90% of our brain that we imagine is now lying dormant.

Contemplative fitness, as I teach it, does not require the adoption of any philosophical or religious beliefs. I will not make claims about the structure of the universe or the ultimate nature of reality. I don't teach how to be right, smart, perfect, sanitized, or holy. I don't teach super-powers or extra-sensory perception. I don't teach religion, guru-worship, dogma, or doctrine. I don't teach people to uncritically accept what I say. I simply teach practical, hands-on techniques that, when practiced diligently, can be utterly transformative to a human life. To the extent that I offer concepts and ideas, they are intended not as doctrine, but as conceptual frameworks within which to understand your own experience. The second part of this book, Theory, will help you orient yourself as you practice.

Contemplative fitness is spiritual enlightenment for the 21st century. And although no less valuable than the mythologized notions of the past, the modern version does not require us to suspend common sense. Rather, it requires us to do some work; progress comes as a result of effective training. The third part of the book, Method, will give you the tools to find this out for yourself.

The physical fitness revolution

When I was a boy growing up in Southern California in the 1960s, the concept of physical fitness, as we know it today, did not yet exist. There had always been sports and athletics, of course, but those pursuits were for a special minority; most of us were not athletes and did not consider exercise to be particularly relevant to our lives except in our capacity as spectators.

And yet, change was in the air. A few visionaries had taken it upon themselves to bring exercise to the people. And it was from these early efforts that the modern concept of physical fitness emerged and began to penetrate the consciousness of everyday folks. One early pioneer was Jack Lalanne, who would eventually come to be seen as the “godfather of fitness.” I remember Jack Lalanne well. He had his own television show, was impressively muscular, charmingly energetic, and always dressed in his trademark black or navy blue jumpsuit. And he always seemed to be doing jumping jacks. The popular image of physical fitness in the 60s was Jack Lalanne doing jumping jacks. At a time when there were only a handful of television stations to choose from, Jack Lalanne was impossible to miss, and he soon became a fixture in every living room in America. Before long, we were all doing jumping jacks in front of the TV.

We can look back now and chuckle at how unsophisticated we were compared to our current understanding of physical fitness. There has been an explosion of sophistication in both the theory and application of exercise science. It is now possible to train with great precision to achieve virtually any kind of physique, always taking into account your own natural strengths and limitations. Whether you want to be a ballet dancer or a power lifter, a tennis player or a marathoner, you can find a fitness trainer who can help you do it. Most importantly, everyday folks who have no intention of ever playing a competitive sport understand the value of physical fitness and often make it a priority in their lives. Physical fitness is real, the concept is well established, and the benefits are well accepted, not just for athletes, but for everyone. And all of this has happened within a single human lifetime.

We are ready for a parallel revolution in contemplative fitness. Years from now, we will look back and chuckle at how unsophisticated we were in our understanding of meditation and its benefits way back in the opening years of the 21st century. Even for those of us who accept that such a thing as spiritual awakening is possible, the field tends to be shrouded in religion, superstition, hero-worship, and unrealistic expectations. We look for inspiration to the Buddha, the Zen Patriarchs, Ramana Maharshi, or some saintly figure from our own time, rarely allowing ourselves to consider that in order for awakening to become real, we must make the transition from spectators to participants. The physical fitness revolution exploded when we stopped watching Jack Lalanne on TV and started doing jumping jacks of our own. The contemplative fitness revolution will begin when we stop looking to our spiritual heroes and start meditating. In this book, I will tell my own story first. It is the story of a depressed and addicted young man who found his way in the world through a single-minded obsession with meditation. Next, I will present a theory of contemplative development based on my formal Buddhist training as well as my thirty-plus years of dedicated practice and my twenty-plus years of teaching meditation and awakening. Finally, I will offer a detailed method that has been successful for dozens of ordinary people as I have guided them through their own process of discovery. My hope is that twenty years from now, contemplative fitness will be as much a part of mainstream culture as physical fitness is today. I believe that a great deal of good will come from such a revolution.

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The Setup

In 1982, I was a suicidally depressed cocaine addict. A 23-year old musician in Los Angeles, I had a lot of free time to sit around being depressed and wondering how my life had gone so terribly wrong. I was trying to kick my cocaine habit, and failing. One night, alone at home, having exhausted all the cocaine in the house and spiraling into despair, I took four hits of LSD. And while I'm neither advocating drugs nor taking a moral stance against them, this is what happened.

I put the LSD in my mouth and turned on the television. I watched part of the *Shogun* miniseries about a 17th Century English ship pilot who was shipwrecked in Japan and adopted Samurai culture. There is a scene in which John Blackthorne, the protagonist, who has now become a Samurai, decides to commit *seppuku*, Japanese ritual suicide by disembowelment. Just as Blackthorne is tensing his muscles to plunge his short sword into his own abdomen, another Samurai reaches out and grabs Blackthorne's hand, preventing his suicide. Watching this scene on television, I wondered about the changes that might take place in the mind of someone who had completely accepted death in a moment and yet didn't die. I was fascinated by the question, and this theme of death and rebirth would set the tone for the evening.

I went into my bedroom, closed the door, and lay down on the bed, face up. I had nothing left to do but reflect upon the unsatisfactoriness of my own life. Still pondering the question of death, I remembered another movie I had seen in which an old Native American Indian chief climbs a hill and lies down on a funeral pyre. The pyre is not lit; it's just a bunch of sticks. The old man lies down on the pyre and says to himself. "Today... is a good day to die."

Tired, defeated, and yet inspired by the possibility of surcease, I said to myself, "Yes. Today *is* a good day to die." In that moment, my mind felt so powerful, so focused... I was absolutely convinced that I could will myself to death.

Flat on my back, I began to meditate, using a technique I had learned from my older brother a couple of years before. It was a simple concentration exercise, nothing more than looking at the backs of my eyelids with eyes closed, and falling into the blackness there. In the past, I had practiced it occasionally in an effort to relax, and to have an interesting experience of an altered state of consciousness. Now, I was meditating with a purpose. And as I was thus engaged, earnestly attempting to will myself to death, an odd thing happened; it occurred to me that if I *did* die, I would be opening myself up to whatever negative forces were out there in the ether. I had a visceral fear that there was some kind of malevolent force, some kind of evil that would wash over me and take control if I let down my guard. I think I also understood in that moment that I had never let down my guard before. So here I was, 23 years old, and somehow I had managed throughout my entire life to maintain a wall, to keep something, who knows what, from entering my consciousness and taking it over. I could feel this unspeakable evil clamoring outside the gates, trying to get in. I was both terrified and bemused.

I wondered if this was what Christians meant by "the Devil," the very personification of evil. Interestingly, I wasn't the least bit religious. I thought religion was foolish. I didn't believe in God. I didn't believe in the Devil. But somehow here I was, thinking "the Devil's gonna get me." Ridiculous, on hindsight, like something out of a seventies-era comedy skit. At the time, though, it didn't feel like a joke. Far from it, in fact; I had never been so frightened. This fear lasted for a few moments, and then I began to ponder a kind of equation of good and evil: if indeed there

were such a thing as the Devil, then there must also be such a thing as a God, in which case, if I opened myself up entirely, they would either cancel themselves out or God would win.

Somehow, this childlike idea of symmetry in the universe gave me just the courage I needed to take the leap. So I did. I opened up entirely and surrendered to death.

This absolute and unquestioned surrender to my own death... no, even more, *commitment* to it... inspired by the movie scene I'd seen earlier of John Blackthorne's abortive suicide attempt, triggered a remarkable series of events.

Immediately upon acceptance of my own death came the recognition that the "malevolent forces" barely held at bay for so many years by my own dogged unwillingness to admit them, were none other than my own fears. I was protecting myself from *myself*. This recognition, so surprising and stark, brought, all of itself, enormous relief. The insufferable burden of a lifetime was seen as an illusion fueled by a misconception. Indeed, the fears themselves were tolerable; it was the effort to avoid them that I could not endure. With the shattering of the illusion, a burden was lifted and the need to die was gone, but the event now had a momentum of its own and continued to unfold even though all thoughts of self-destruction had evaporated.

Next was a kind of instantaneous life review. A thousand images flowed through my mind in a single moment, images of things I had done, both "good" and "bad." The theme was that actions have consequences; it was immediately and intuitively obvious that actions motivated by good will had led to positive results while actions motivated by ill will had led to sorrow. This insight was matter-of-fact, with no implied judgment or moralism; here is everything I've done, and here are the consequences of each action. Here was my very own mechanistic, non-moralistic judgment day.

The experience continued to unfold in stages. Next, I found myself being drawn up into the sky through what appeared to be a long glass tube. I was fascinated, riveted by this experience. Suddenly, there appeared a flock of small, translucent, quasi-intelligent, possibly unfriendly beings on the other side of the glass tube, trying to get my attention, and keeping pace with me as I was sucked up toward the sky. I had the impression that they wanted to get inside the tube, to go where I was going, and that they were frustrated by being stuck outside. I was aware that I had taken acid and was hallucinating, but the kind of cohesion and consistency of these visions, this entirely new world created out of thin air, was unlike anything I had experienced before, with or without drugs. As I was floating up the glass tube alongside these roundish, colorful beings, I remember thinking to myself that this must be some kind of challenge or quest: *"I've got to find a way to communicate with these things, but we don't have a language in common. How can I communicate with them?"* I felt that if I could find some common ground with the creatures, we would be able to establish a basis for communication. Well, it didn't happen. My mind was a blank. If it was a quest, I failed it. I soon outpaced the creatures and they disappeared.

I was being sucked up into the sky faster and faster now, and was able to see that there was an end to the tube, and at the end of it was white light... blinding, glorious, perfect light beyond imagining. I was moving so fast now that almost immediately after first glimpsing the light, I was pulled into it and merged with it. And this was far and away the most ecstatic experience of my life so far. Because now I was one with what felt like universal consciousness. It was an utterly mind-blowing experience. I thought *this* must be what the Christian mystics meant when they said "God". But it wasn't the personal God of a Michelangelo painting. It wasn't a man up in the sky who was like me, only big and powerful; it was everything that was or had been or could ever be, and it was self-aware. And in that moment of merging with what seemed to be universal consciousness, it was as though I knew everything there was to know; everything that needed to be known was known, and yet there was no need to ask. This felt really good.

Beyond good. Perfect, exquisite, ecstatic, flawless... superlatives fail to capture it. I marveled to

myself, “Everything up until now, my entire life, has been a dream. Only now am I awake. Only this is real.” And almost immediately I realized that it was going to end. I was going to be kicked out of the garden. Later, I wrote in my journal, “As I lay naked beneath God’s crushing foot, I asked Him to throw me a bone: ‘Nobody is going to believe this. I’m going to need some proof. Give me something to take back with me.’” This experience of merger with something infinitely larger than myself made everything else pale in comparison, and already I could see that it would end and that I would have nothing to show for it. There was a moment of profound grief. A moment later, I found myself back in my room, lying on my bed facing upward, exhilarated, exhausted, annihilated and reborn.

Now, as it happened, my cocaine addiction vanished in that moment; I have not used cocaine since. There was no aversion, no negative feeling about the drug. I just wasn’t interested anymore. My reaction to being offered cocaine was similar to what I imagine might happen if someone offered me a plate of cold, raw tofu: “No thanks, I don’t much like cold, raw tofu.” There was no offense and no judgmentalism, only disinterest. It later occurred to me that this might be the “bone” I had asked for, the objective proof that something remarkable had happened. As to who it was that granted me this boon of the bone, my thinking has changed over the years. I no longer believe I was having a conversation with an “Eternal Being,” or even that there is such a thing, although I did believe that for a long time after the event. My current speculation is that what happened that day was an internal event, a function of the interplay between a brain, a psychoactive substance, meditation, and a traumatic life situation. One way or the other, the experience was deeply moving and may have saved my life in addition to setting me on a new course.

The experience of union showed me a reality beyond my ordinary self, but it was only a short-lived glimpse. I found myself on a quest to understand what had happened to me and to “get it back.” With the assumption that what I had glimpsed was somehow truer than my ordinary life, I wanted to be able to access it again, and ultimately find a way to feel like that all the time. I was now officially a seeker, but I didn’t know how to seek. For many years following that experience, I couldn’t escape the feeling that I was somehow “doing it wrong.” I experienced myself as alien, but I remembered that it was possible to be complete, and I was determined to feel that way again.

Although both meditation and drugs were involved in that first big opening, my intuitive sense was that the way forward was through meditation, not drugs; it seemed to me that while drugs might temporarily open windows in the mind, a more systematic approach would be required to keep them open. So, I began meditating each day while I did some research.

I began by reading self-improvement books, a genre I had previously regarded with contempt. I read the likes of Dr. Wayne Dyer about how to realize your potential as a human being. That was a place to start, but it wasn’t zoomed in enough on where I wanted to go. On a recommendation from a friend, I bought a copy of the Ram Dass book *Be Here Now*. This was getting closer. Ram Dass made vague but tantalizing references to spiritual awakening, spinning interesting and implausible yarns about his guru, who he considered to be a “fully realized being.” From there, I began reading Buddhist books, getting ever closer to what I really wanted, which was an instruction manual. I read Alan Watts on Zen wisdom and then *The Three Pillars of Zen* by Philip Kapleau. I also read Ouspensky’s book about Gurdjieff, and took a brief detour into New Age books like *Seth Speaks* and Richard Bach’s *Illusions*. I found all sorts of hints, a drop of wisdom, a dollop of childish nonsense, and a large portion of snake oil, but no method. In 1989, I read Ken Wilber’s *Spectrum of Consciousness*. Wilber was the first author I had found who bridged the gap between a nebulous and impractical pursuit of spiritual enlightenment and a more concrete understanding that could be approached systematically and

reconciled with common sense and science. By talking about levels of mind that could be targeted by specific practices, Wilber made spiritual awakening/enlightenment sound like a realistic project. But he did not offer a method. I had been an almost daily meditator for seven years, ever since my big opening in 1982; I was willing to do the work if someone could give me the instructions. In *Spectrum of Consciousness*, Wilber mentioned in passing that he was offering a conceptual framework as opposed to a method, and that resources abounded for those who sought a more hands-on approach. I was frustrated. I had no idea what resources he was referring to. I continued to practice without a teacher.

Fast forward to 1990, eight years after my first unitive experience. My depression had returned. I made my living as a bass player in a dance rock band. Sometimes I would find myself onstage in front of a hundred people, on the verge of tears for no reason that I could name. I couldn't play music anymore. I quit the band in North Carolina, where I had moved two years earlier to pursue my musical career, and moved back to Southern California. I promised myself I would never again perform music for money. All I wanted to do was meditate. My most cherished fantasy involved checking myself into a cave in the Himalayas and living as a monk for the rest of my life.

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Bill Hamilton

When I moved back to Southern California, I had my mail forwarded from the post office in Chapel Hill. A few weeks after arriving in California, a postcard arrived, forwarded from my old address. It was a simple white postcard with some dot matrix computer-printed text on it, advertising a series of audiocassette recordings of discussions between the Dalai Lama and western scientists. It sounded intriguing, so I decided to order the tapes, which would set me back about twenty bucks. Reading the phone number on the postcard, I noticed that the area code and prefix were from a town not more than a half hour's drive from where I was now living. Excited, I called the number and said I'd like to order the tape set, and that I was nearby, just half an hour away. The man on the other end of the line, whose name was Bill Hamilton, said he was a meditation teacher and invited me for a visit.

My first impulse was to impress Bill with what I knew about Buddhism and spirituality, because I was used to thinking of myself as a big deal; I'd had this thing happen to me that most people hadn't had, or at least weren't talking about. But within two minutes of meeting Bill, I realized he wasn't speculating; he knew far more about meditation and awakening than I did. I stopped talking and started listening.

Bill was twenty-five years older than I. He was gawky and tall, about 6'1". He had white hair, a Prince Valiant haircut, and a short white beard. He was affable, humorous, and just slightly socially awkward, with a tendency toward malapropisms. In spite of the occasional mis-used

word, though, Bill Hamilton was a masterful communicator. He was eloquent, articulate, creative, and had a special way with concepts. And he was the king of the one-liners. When I asked Bill what it felt like to be enlightened, he said, "Suffering less. Noticing it more." Bill was a natural entrepreneur. He had founded the Dharma Seed Tape Library as a volunteer at Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in 1983 but had since moved on and was now subsisting solely on the proceeds of his own mail order cassette tape business, Insight Recordings. He had a couple of professional dubbing machines in his apartment, and did all of his own promotion and bookkeeping on his computer. Bill liked to modify his own computers; he had several, and they were always breaking down. He liked to laugh about "computer follies," which was his way of referring to all the time he spent jury-rigging his machines. He also had a 35mm SLR camera that he would drag out randomly to shoot pictures. Bill had been married and divorced three times, and was now alone.

Bill became my mentor. I drove the 20 miles to his apartment every Sunday afternoon for a personalized dharma talk, a hangout, and 45 minutes of formal sitting meditation. The first thing Bill taught me was to use Mahasi Sayadaw's (Footnote here with link to noting definition and instructions.) mental noting technique instead of the Zen breath counting exercise I'd learned from a book. And every Sunday evening, when I left Bill's house to drive home, I would be on cloud nine, full of hope and optimism, and a deep calm that felt like the most precious gift in the world, and the only thing worth pursuing in an otherwise confusing and pointless existence. I did not understand why spending time with this old man affected me so profoundly.

One of the things that struck me about Bill was his willingness to walk his talk. The first day I met him, he needed to go to his storage unit to get something out of it. Since Bill drove an old yellow Volkswagen bug, he asked me to drive him there in my Honda wagon, which had more cargo space. At the storage unit, rummaging around in boxes, Bill found a black widow spider. I would've just killed it, but Bill left it alone. When I asked him why, he told me that one of the five precepts of Theravada Buddhism was to avoid killing. I was impressed by the fact that he not only knew about these precepts, but actually followed them, unwilling to kill so much as a bug. Inspired by Bill's example, I too adopted the precept to avoid killing "sentient beings," and for years I didn't kill insects either. Incidentally, a few years later I was on retreat at Bill's Whidbey Island Retreat, which was his retreat center (made available by a generous friend) in Washington State, consisting of 20 acres of pine forest and Bill's tiny trailer, along with an extra motor home for a yogi or two to stay in. I was the only student there at the time. One day, I saw Bill smack a mosquito. I said, "I see you're no longer abstaining from killing insects."

Bill said, "Last time I was [on meditation retreat] in Burma I felt like killing them. So I did." Bill had been following the non-killing precept for years. I interpreted this not as backsliding, but as progress. Notwithstanding the beauty of a life without killing, Bill had come to a place in his practice and his life where he could question even his own dogma.

Compared to everything I'd heard and read previously, Bill's model of enlightenment was simple and clear. He told me about the four "Paths of Enlightenment" of Theravada Buddhism, discrete developmental landmarks that could be attained by systematically applying the vipassana technique.^[1] Together, the four paths form a map of what can happen when a meditator does vipassana practice.^[2] If you read traditional descriptions of these four paths, you will find references to future rebirths (and lack thereof), saints, "fetters," and "purification." If, on the other hand, you strip away the jargon, magical thinking, gratuitous mythology, and hero-worship, while making healthy allowances for hyperbole and hagiography, the four-path model can be interpreted as describing an organic process of human development. (Editor's note: Link to a section describing my interpretation of the four path model explaining why I reject the idea that I am "redefining" the model; my contention is that there is no One Correct Way (orthodoxy) to

interpret ancient teachings, by which all other interpretations must be judged (and found lacking).)

In other words, the ancient Buddhists were *onto* something. Bill was talking about something do-able, and he believed there were many people living today who had these attainments, including *arahatship* (fourth of the four paths), or “full enlightenment” according to Theravada Buddhism. Bill gave me to understand through indirect speech that he himself had attained at least the second of these four paths of enlightenment. Finally, after eight years of reading fairy tales culled from a Zen master’s fantasy, I was sitting across the table from a man who asserted that there *was* something called enlightenment, and that he had it. Or at least that he had some significant amount of it, and was working towards getting more of it. (Purists, don’t despair at the irony of *getting* enlightenment as though it were a side of bacon in the butcher shop window. We’ll discuss the pros and cons of “[spiritual materialism](#)” in a later section. For now, suffice to say that it was precisely the clarity of language made possible by the acquisitive approach to awakening that made it possible for me to jump in with both feet.)

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First Long Retreats

Within a few months of meeting Bill, he had convinced me to commit to a three-month-long intensive meditation retreat at Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts. When he first suggested it, I balked; the prospect of spending three months in silence, meditating all day long, every day, was daunting. But I soon warmed up to the idea. The guidelines for the three-month retreat called for several weeks of prerequisite meditation retreats before attending such a long program. But Bill had connections at IMS, having spent most of the 80s there as a “long term yogi,” living in the unfinished basement of the facility, attending all the retreats and recording the dharma talks. He pulled some strings and got me signed up. I spent the fall of 1991 on retreat. I kept a journal of the entire ordeal. When I returned home around Christmas time, I sat down with Bill to tell him about it, reading directly from my notes. I read for two hours straight, and literally put Bill to sleep at one point. I pretended not to notice that he was snoring and kept reading. After listening to my report, Bill told me that I had gone through ten of the sixteen stages leading up to stream entry or “first path,” the first level of enlightenment according to the Theravada map. I had not attained stream entry, but I was close. Remarkably, Bill was able to extract some useful information from my long-winded story. It took me years to figure out that my vipassana teachers didn’t care what I *thought* about my meditation. No matter how important it seemed to me, they couldn’t glean much information from my opinions and psychological or philosophical commentary. They wanted to hear about what *actually happened*, in clear, simple terms. The ability to distinguish experience from thoughts about experience is key to both effective practice and effective reporting. By comparing phenomenological descriptions of my

experience to the developmental map they carried in their heads, they could tentatively place me on that map and give me targeted advice on how to develop further.

Based on my report, Bill was able to neatly line up my experiences with the Progress of Insight map. (Footnote to P of I essay.) He showed me, point by point, where I was and where I had been. About halfway through the retreat, for example, I'd fallen into a notoriously difficult stretch of territory, and languished in it for the remainder of my time in Massachusetts, meditating less, sleeping more, ruminating and worrying, journaling, shuffling about the retreat center in a funk, and generally wasting time. Bill explained that all of this was predictable, and that if I'd spent more time meditating and less time thinking and writing during the second half of the retreat, I might well have moved through this difficult stage and on to next, which was, by the way, a distinctly more agreeable state. I might even have attained stream entry! I pointed out that this would have been valuable information to have in real time. "Why didn't my interview teachers tell me what *you* just told me?"

Bill grinned. "IMS is a mushroom factory."

I didn't catch the reference, so he explained: "Keep 'em in the dark and feed 'em shit."

How to explain the impact of one comment on my entire life? The IMS teachers had treated us, the students, like "mushrooms." I was stunned, later enraged. I found it appalling that teachers would withhold such valuable information. Surely, if I had known that my discouragement, confusion, and lack of motivation were normal, typical, temporary, and the entirely predictable consequence of a particular phase of development that was first mapped over 2,000 years ago, I would have practiced differently and had a more successful retreat.

My commitment to full disclosure about states and stages was born with Bill Hamilton's "mushroom" comment. Much of my teaching since 1991 has been a reaction to what I came to think of as the "mushroom culture" of mainstream Western Buddhism. The antidote to the mushroom culture was the simple dissemination of information. I railed (and still rail) against the presumption, patriarchy, and authoritarianism that leads a few teachers to withhold information from their students. This theme later became a movement, when my friend Daniel Ingram, having heard my story and later having experienced the mushroom culture for himself, wrote about it in his 2003 book, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*.

Bill suggested that I go to Asia, check myself into a monastery, and get stream entry. So that's what I decided to do. At the time, I only cared about meditation. The rest of my life didn't matter. Bill told me: "Everything you do in order to make your next retreat possible is part of your practice." I found this vastly empowering; now it was possible to view all aspects of my life as supporting my practice, rather than getting in the way of it. I had a job delivering pizzas at Domino's Pizza, which was demoralizing due to the low wage. Again, Bill came to the rescue: "Just figure out how many pizzas you need to hustle to buy a ticket to Burma. Then, get busy." I got busy. Although I didn't earn much at the pizza store, my goal was concrete, and I could see progress each day as my piggy bank filled up. I sold my car and bought a one-way ticket to Malaysia, understanding that I was going to meditate at a Burmese-style monastery in Penang while applying for a visa to continue on to Burma. I didn't know when or whether I would return home. In fact, returning home was the furthest thing from my mind. I planned to get enlightened. I was steeped in the four paths model of enlightenment that I'd learned from Bill, and I wanted to get not just first, but also second path before returning home from Asia, however long that might take.^[3]

I remember saying to Sayadaw U Rajinda, the Burmese monk who was both my interview teacher and abbot of Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre in Penang, "I'm going to stay in Asia until I get 2nd path." U Rajinda smiled approvingly, and in his deep, resonant voice, said, "Good plan." This was powerful validation; now, both Bill Hamilton and Sayadaw U Rajinda were on my

team, and both of them took this as seriously as I did. Enlightenment was real and doable. I stayed in Malaysia for six months. U Rajinda was my teacher throughout that time. I saw him later that year in Burma when he came for a visit, and again in Malaysia after that. He and I formed a bond. He once drew a picture of me on a scrap of paper and gave it to me as a gift. It was an image of a shaven-headed meditator sitting cross-legged in meditation, with the caption "Mr. Kenneth" printed underneath in English.

Being on retreat in the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition is intense, immersive, and often grueling. There's very little to do other than meditate. You go to sleep at 9:00pm, wake up at 3:00am and meditate, alternating one hour of sitting with one hour of walking meditation. Sometimes I would wake up at 2:00am. If you whittle it down to four hours of sleep by going to bed at 10:00pm and waking up at 2:00am, you earn a smile from the monks and a sense of macho satisfaction. After breakfast, there is a work period. They give you a piece of a plant, something like a palm frond, to use as a broom, and you might spend 10 minutes sweeping the floor of the meditation hall. An ordinary broom would be more effective, but there is apparently some sort of ceremonial significance to the frond, and after all, it's not as though we were pressed for time. After work period, it's back to meditation, all day long, with a break for lunch at 10:00am. Lunch is the last meal of the day; monks are not allowed to eat after noon, and there were no special provisions for those of us practicing as lay people to sneak in an extra meal.

A little bit of talking is allowed, especially if it is about meditation, but anything beyond five or ten minutes a day is met with disapproval. As such, most of the adventures occur internally. Looking at the workings of your own mind is rarely dull, and you encounter the whole range of experience, from "this is the most wonderful, amazing experience possible for a human and I never want to leave retreat" to "I hate everything about this and I've got to get out of this hell hole immediately." The deep compulsion to let the process run its course, to find out where it was going, was so strong that I stayed for an entire year the first time, and for months at a time in two subsequent trips to Southeast Asian monasteries.

Within about two months of starting my retreat in Malaysia, meditation had become uneventful. All of the big, exciting, "wow" things of my earlier practice had passed and I was just sitting, quiet and comfortable. This is the stage called "insight knowledge of equanimity" on the Progress of Insight map, the stage just beyond where I had gotten on my IMS retreat in Massachusetts. One day, sitting after lunch, something changed. I fell so deeply into meditation, it was almost as though I went to sleep, or lost consciousness for a moment. And then, suddenly, I perked up and said to myself, "Was that it? I think that was it."

According to the Mahasi interpretation, stream entry and subsequent path moments are signaled by an event called a "cessation."^[4] A cessation, by this interpretation, is a blip out, a loss of consciousness, typically for just a brief moment, although in some cases it might last longer. Now you're here, now you're not, now you're back, with no sense of the passage of time and no memory of what happened in the interim. The first time this occurs, it signals stream entry. I instantly recognized my experience that afternoon as stream entry, based on what I had heard and read about the phenomenon. Bill Hamilton had characterized stream entry as a great anticlimax compared to experiences that often precede it, like my first mind-shattering opening in 1982. Although such powerful unitive experiences are often assumed to be enlightenment by those who experience them, they are, at least according to the Theravada Buddhist tradition, preliminary stages; Bill said that the initial unitive opening is to stream entry as the germination of a seed is to the blossom that eventually grows from it.

After attaining stream entry in Malaysia, I got up from the cushion and walked around the monastery laughing for a day or two. I felt free. Life was good. I suddenly had access to jhanas. Jhanas are pleasant, discrete, reproducible altered states of consciousness, each more refined

and exquisite than the next.^[5] I found that I suddenly had access to four of these states. I had heard a little bit about the jhanas and what they were supposed to be like, but this was my first experience with them. The first four jhanas would normally arise in order during a sitting: one, two, three, four. But I also found that I had random access, and could jump to any jhana from any other, just by intending to do so. The jhanas appeared as discrete channels to which I could attune the mind, much like moving the dial of an old-fashioned radio. The depth and clarity of these new meditative states was completely different from the day before. I took this as further validation of stream entry.

Within hours of the event, I went to Sayadaw U Rajinda's room and knocked on his door to request an impromptu interview, something I had never done before. I told him what had happened and hinted that I understood this to be stream entry. U Rajinda hinted that he thought so too, and gave me the new instruction to note "pleasant" and "unpleasant" while sitting, and sent me back out to meditate some more. "Pleasant experiences may arise in your sittings and they may stay for a long time," he said. "Be sure to note, 'pleasant,' when this happens." After six months in Malaysia (and a great deal of pleasantness), I flew to Burma, where I would spend another six months at Panditarama Meditation Center in Rangoon. My teacher there was the famous and cantankerous Sayadaw U Pandita, abbot of Panditarama, highly decorated scholar, and celebrated master of the technical aspects of meditation. In his community, he was affectionately known as "Sayadawgyi" (pronounced "sigh-a-dow JEE") meaning "Big Sayadaw." *Sayadaw* is itself an honorific meaning "elder monk." There were lots of Sayadaws in Burma, but there was only one Sayadaw Gi at Panditarama.

U Pandita was interested in spreading the Buddhist teachings outside of Burma, so he spent a lot of time with the foreign yogis, charging his lieutenants with the supervision of the local Burmese students. We foreigners (non-Burmese yogis, both Asian and Western), interviewed with Sayadaw U Pandita several times a week, and we heard dharma talks by him on the days we weren't interviewing. The interviews were done through an interpreter, even though U Pandita was able to understand a bit of English. Interviews were one-on-one, but were done in front of the entire group of 10–15 foreigners, so we all got to hear all the interviews.

Several times a week, I would spend half an hour or so talking privately with U Vivekananda, a German monk and disciple of U Pandita who has since become a Sayadaw in his own right, and abbot of Panditarama Lumbini in Nepal. U Vivekananda spoke perfect English and was more forthcoming than Sayadaw U Pandita. Monk's rules prevented him from being completely open in our discussions, especially with regard to his own experience, but I could ask him questions that I couldn't ask U Pandita.

Much about the authoritarian structure and hierarchy of the monastery was difficult for me. Having to bow three times, on hands and knees, forehead to the floor, before and after each interview with Sayadaw U Pandita seemed like a charming custom at first, but eventually it was just annoying. I wanted to engage U Pandita in discussion, and in my more grandiose moments I even fantasized about educating him about what I considered to be certain superior aspects of Western culture. Once, I brought this up to U Vivekananda after a frosty encounter with U Pandita. The German monk said, "Never argue with Sayadaw. He simply can't *tolerate* it." This was obviously true, and part of the challenge of monastery life was suppressing my own psychological need for open engagement on a level playing field; there was no opportunity for that whatsoever. I reminded myself again and again that it was worth the pain; I was getting something that I couldn't have gotten anywhere else. So I stayed on.

There is a common misconception that a high level of contemplative development will necessarily transform a human being into a lovable, likable, caring, infinitely compassionate, and utterly sanitized cartoon saint. Sayadaw U Pandita was living proof that this was not so; he

displayed the whole range of emotion. Although he could at times be loving, kind, and supportive, more often he appeared angry, irritated, cutting and sarcastic. In short, he was a mean old man. Between my instinct for self-preservation and the powerful taboo against outright disclosure, I judged it unwise to simply tell U Pandita that I believed I had attained stream entry. All I could tell him was what I was experiencing in my individual meditation sessions. When I first arrived in Burma, I was still in the review phase after stream entry, a kind of afterglow that follows attainment of a path. This left me without much motivation for precise reporting; my meditations were often so blissful that I would just sit and bask in pleasure for an hour or more at a time. I wasn't able to adequately describe the precise phenomenology of those experiences, so to U Pandita I was just being sloppy. He shouted, "You are dull, dreamy, drifty! This is not acceptable!" He would angrily hold forth on the inferiority of western yogis in general and Americans in particular. "You Americans, you think you can do it your way! But here in Burma, there's only *one* way, and that is *my way!*" It would have been funny, had it not been so intimidating. Kneeling on the floor of a monastery in a foreign land, with the legendary Sayadaw U Pandita sitting cross-legged on his throne above me, surrounded by his disciple monks, my Western notions of equality did not apply.

I became obsessed with U Pandita. His presence filled my world. Every waking moment was spent reflecting on our conversations and his criticisms, along with imagined conversations in which I would skillfully refute his attacks. But there was no future in this and I knew it. My two options were to either follow Sayadaw's instructions, or to leave the retreat. After several weeks of internal turmoil and barely restrained resentment during interviews, my resistance collapsed. In my mind, I bowed to U Pandita and said, "I surrender. You're the king. What do you want me to do?" U Pandita recognized the change at our very next interview. As soon as I began to do things his way, I saw the kind and supportive side of the man. He smiled. "So now... you look like a yogi!"

What Sayadaw U Pandita wanted was for me to be almost painfully simple in my reporting. He wanted me to say, for example, "when I observe the rise and fall of the abdomen, I feel pressure, tightness, coolness, warmth, softness. I feel mind states of fear, annoyance, joy, equanimity." These kinds of bare-bones explanations gave him the information he needed to gauge my progress, place me on a map of development, and give targeted advice. It was very important to him that I not space out or get into sleepy, dreamy, states, and that I report in simple, concrete terms, with little or no interpretation or commentary.

I did not attain 2nd Path on this first Asian retreat, in spite of my earlier promise to Sayadaw U Rajinda during my stay in Malaysia. After about a year of intensive meditation in the austere conditions of Buddhist monasteries, I was sick and exhausted. I had lost 60 pounds of bodyweight, going from 200 to 140 in 12 months. It was time to fly back to the States and rest.

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Alaska

While I was in Asia, my parents bought a cabin by a lake near Haines, Alaska, and got to know some people there, including a locally famous artist and woodcarver. He had been to India as a spiritual seeker when he was young, and understood the culture shock of returning home after immersion in another culture. When he heard that I was returning from a year-long retreat in Southeast Asia, he suggested to my parents that I come live with him and his family and work in his art gallery as I reintegrated into American culture. And that's what I did. The artist taught me the art of woodcarving in his unique style, which was heavily influenced by Northwest Coast Indian Art.

I was also involved in community theater in Haines. We performed a melodrama every Saturday and Sunday night in the summertime for the tourists who came on cruise ships. Occasionally we'd do a big production as well, and when we performed *Fiddler on the Roof*, I played Fyedka, the Russian boyfriend. My Alaskan adventure was a magical time, a creative time, and the calm and clarity of mind resulting from a year of intensive meditation practice made the breathtaking natural beauty of Southeast Alaska seem all the more exquisite.

Shortly after arriving in Alaska, a local woman recruited me to teach meditation, and I led a weekly sitting group. I would give talks and teach basic techniques like following the breath and noting in the Mahasi style. I also taught the model of the four paths model of enlightenment that I'd learned from Bill Hamilton and my Asian teachers, and spoke of stream entry as a realistic goal. I made no secret of the fact that I believed I had attained stream entry. These views were met, for the most part, with resistance or indifference, but there were a handful of people who became my friends and came regularly to the weekly sittings.

Most people in that tiny Alaskan town thought of me as a kind of odd quasi-monk. I didn't date throughout the time I spent in Alaska, mainly because the women I was interested in attended my sitting group, and it was clear to me that it wasn't a good idea for teachers to date their students. So I continued my monkish ways. My parents were spending the summers in their cabin 26 miles outside of town, so every weekend my father would pick me up and we would drive out to the cabin together. My dad was an avid, even obsessive, fisherman. He and I would go fishing every weekend, both Saturday and Sunday, on a nearby river or on the lake just outside the cabin's back door. Mother was an intellectual and a reader; she and I would discuss ideas in the evening, sitting at the table in the one-room cabin as Dad lovingly cared for his fishing tackle. In the wintertime, Mom and Dad would drive back to their place in Oregon, and I spent my first Alaskan winter alone in the cabin by the now frozen lake. There was no electricity. Illumination was courtesy of gaslights, and the cabin's only heat source was a leaky old Franklin stove that required constant attention and had an insatiable appetite for firewood. I spent a lot of time alone that first winter, splitting wood, feeding the stove, reading, and meditating.

I returned to Southeast Asia twice for retreats during the period I called Alaska home; two months in Malaysia for the first trip, and four months for the second, half in Malaysia and half in Burma. My teacher in Burma on my third Asian retreat was the lovable Sayadaw U Kundala, a direct disciple of Mahasi Sayadaw who was as famous as U Pandita in Burma, but less well known in the West. It was on this retreat with U Kundala that I attained second path. Both stream entry and second path were so obvious to me that I didn't require validation from my teachers. Nonetheless, Sayadaw U Kundala validated me. I described the phenomenology of the

cessations I was experiencing, which at the time I experienced as cluster of visual freeze frames, often in quick succession, and U Kundala declared: “Oh, this is *magga phala!*” *Magga* and *phala* are the Pali words for “path” and “fruition,” respectively. I explained that I had experienced this once before, two years earlier in Malaysia, and had been through the stages of the Progress of Insight before as well. Sayadaw U Kundala acknowledged this and even taught me how to use resolutions to re-experience the cessations of stream entry and second path, which were subtly different.

I was impressed by how open Sayadaw U Kundala and many of the Burmese Buddhists were in talking about meditative attainments and progress. There seemed to be a whole culture of acknowledging attainment at U Kundala’s monastery. According to Buddhist tradition, giving a gift to someone who has attained some level of enlightenment accrues spiritual merit to the giver, so as word got out (various people were able to overhear my interviews with U Kundala) that a Western student was making progress, people began to come to my room and offer me gifts, including some beautiful silk sarongs and a warm Russian-style furry hat with earflaps for chilly Rangoon mornings in the cool season.

When I finished the retreat and was ready to leave Burma, I got a ride to the airport from a man who was a board member at the monastery. He was clearly well connected in Rangoon, because when we get to the airport, he waved his hand at a bunch of soldiers with assault rifles, causing them to stand back and let me pass, so that I didn’t have to wait in the customs line with the other hapless tourists. As I was walking away, the man from the monastery waved goodbye and shouted to me across the crowded airport, “You got two! Come back for a third,” in a less-than-veiled reference to the four paths of enlightenment.

I had remained in touch with Bill Hamilton throughout my time in Alaska, and would periodically go to California or Bill’s Whidbey Island Retreat in Washington to spend time with him or to do a silent retreat. Returning from my third Asian trip, I stopped by Whidbey Island. Bill confirmed my attainment of second path in his characteristic indirect style; I later heard from a mutual friend, “Bill said you attained second path!” This was part of the odd, roundabout way in which Bill liked to communicate about attainments. In my own teaching, I have taken the Burmese willingness to talk about attainments one step further; I speak openly about my own attainments and freely give my opinion to my students about where I think they can be placed on a developmental map.[\[6\]](#)

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Deeper Into Jhana

After attaining second path and returning from Asia, I spent several months meditating at Bill Hamilton’s Whidbey Island Retreat. I had gained access to the first four jhanas with stream entry, and I now set out to develop jhanas 5-8, four more altered states commonly described in

Theravada Buddhist literature. I thought of jhana practice as support for my vipassana practice as well as being interesting in its own right, and I wanted to be able to access these states on demand. I planned to do *kasina* practice, a type of pure concentration practice in which the attention is held steady on a single object or concept.^[7] I had a brown plastic sluicing bowl from Burma that I had bought to bathe from water tanks when I didn't have access to a shower, and this bowl was to serve as my kasina. I propped up the bowl in my tent on Whidbey Island and got to work; the work in this case was as simple as staring at the bowl for hours at a time.^[8] Using this technique, I was able to develop the fifth jhana within a few days, and the others followed one after the other until I had access to eight distinct altered states.

Having attained the first two levels of enlightenment according to the four paths model, my next landmark would be third path. I had heard a little about third path from Sayadaw U Pandita and from Bill Hamilton. It was said that first and second path were fairly straightforward and I had even heard from Bill Hamilton that first and second path were "a dime a dozen" in Buddhist circles. But third path was considered more difficult, rare, and harder to diagnose. And in fact, although my own attainment of stream entry and second path were self-evident, the exact moment in which I attained third path is not clear to me.

Some time in the mid-90s, I discovered a new set of jhanas beyond the eight commonly taught within Buddhism. I was sitting in my car after a grocery shopping expedition. I remembered reading about a vow that a Buddha named Amitabha had made. According to what I remembered of the mythology, Amitabha once vowed that anyone who sincerely invoked his name would be instantly transported to the Pure Land, a kind of Buddhist heaven.

Notwithstanding my initial experience of mystical union in 1982 and a few brief flirtations with religious concepts, I had remained as skeptical as ever, and didn't believe for a moment that there was a magical Buddha named Amitabha up in the sky, poised to intervene on my behalf. Still, I well understood the power of metaphor and suggestion in human experience, so I decided to try an experiment. With as much sincerity as I could muster, I invoked Amitabha Buddha by repeating the phrase "Namo Amitabha" over and over. Almost immediately, I entered a state of boundless gratitude and happiness that I hadn't felt before. This was a discrete altered state, but not one of the eight jhanas I was already familiar with. This new state was so pleasant and profound that one of my first thoughts was I would happily toss away all of the previous eight jhanas in return for this one. I found that I could conjure up this new jhana at will by picturing Amitabha Buddha in his traditional red robes, by recalling the sense of boundless gratitude, or by focusing on the "third eye" area in the middle of my forehead, which was experienced prominently in this state. I dubbed this new state the "Pure Land jhana," since it had come from the Pure Land Buddhist practice of invoking Amitabha Buddha. A few months later, I went on another retreat with Bill at Whidbey Island and discovered another altered state in the same mental territory as the Pure Land jhana. It wasn't the same state as the Pure Land jhana, but was of similar character, so I began thinking of these states as Pure Land One and Pure Land Two.

While I was cultivating the Pure Land jhanas on Whidbey Island, I received a letter from my good friend and former meditation student Daniel Ingram in which he claimed access to a state called nirodha samapatti.^[9] Nirodha samapatti (NS) is a special meditative phenomenon that is said to only be accessible to *anagamis* (those who had attained the third path of enlightenment) and *arahats* (fourth path practitioners, the "fully enlightened"). I once heard U Pandita describe NS during a dharma talk in Rangoon as "a way of accessing nibbana"^[10] that "those nobles ones, the *anagamis* and *arahats*" had in their bag of tricks. The developmental aspect got my attention; if only 3rd path yogis and beyond had access to nirodha samapatti, then access to NS was necessarily a key diagnostic criterion. To access NS was to be an anagami, a

developmental attainment supposedly so lofty that most modern Buddhist practitioners did not consider it a reasonable goal. And here was my friend Daniel claiming to have access to NS, and accordingly claiming to have attained third path. I didn't believe him. I wrote back to Daniel suggesting that he get over himself and keep practicing. Years later, though, perhaps in 2003, I found that I also was able to access to a curious state that seemed to line up with textual descriptions of nirodha samapatti. Daniel and I compared notes and seemed to be experiencing the same thing. Together and separately, we have since heard many of our students describe a similar phenomenon.

In the face of the prevailing Buddhist culture, which holds that we live in a degenerate age and that it is not possible for modern humans to achieve the same levels of awakening as the great mystics of the past, it is natural to ask whether what I identify as nirodha samapatti is the same phenomenon described by the ancients. Unfortunately, I cannot know the answer to this question. I can never be sure that any of the experiences described by others correspond exactly with my own, and this kind of comparative mind-mapping becomes all the more difficult if the other people involved are dead or unwilling to talk openly. The larger issues here are dear to me and have become a mainstay of my practice and teaching. Are modern people capable of attaining the high levels of contemplative development spoken of in ancient texts as "awakening"? I believe we are. In fact, it's hard for me to imagine what would prevent it. To the extent that the accomplishments of ancient meditators seem beyond our reach, I suspect it has more to do with hyperbole and hagiography than with any inadequacy on the part of modern humans. I believe it is realistic for us to reach and even go beyond the achievements of the ancients and I practice and teach accordingly. Contemplative fitness is within everyone's reach, and contemplative excellence is there for those of us willing to dedicate our lives to its pursuit. In this, we see yet another parallel between physical and contemplative fitness. As for the conventional wisdom that awakening not only leads to but is defined by moral perfection, omniscience, etc., my answer is simple; I don't believe there ever was a morally perfected or omniscient human. Whatever contemplative development the ancients were describing, it did not entail perfection. And yet, I am convinced that ancient advocates of meditation were pointing to something real and infinitely valuable. My ongoing efforts to separate reality from fantasy, abandoning childish notions of perfection while continuing to cultivate contemplative excellence are a large part of what motivates my teaching (and this book.)

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Third Path

Years after I first came across the two Pure Land jhanas, I found a list of the 31 realms of existence of Buddhist cosmology on the Internet.^[11] The 31 mythical realms were mapped to jhanas. I'd seen a poster years before, hanging on the wall in the Malaysian Buddhist Meditation

Centre, that lined up the 31 realms to jhanas in a similar way. In the online map, there were five realms said to be accessible to anagamis and arahats only. These were labeled as *suddhavaśa* realms or "Pure Abodes." This was a great "aha" moment for me. From here, it wasn't much of a stretch to connect the states I had independently named "Pure Land" jhanas with these "Pure Abode" realms. Bill Hamilton often spoke of mapping our mind states to the Buddhist realms. For Bill, the Buddhist realms of existence were, above all, a mind map; irrespective of whether one believed they had any independent existence, we could view the realms as corresponding to layers of mind that were stable enough to be taken as object and accessed as jhanas. It also seemed plausible that the reason no one seemed to be talking about or teaching any jhanas beyond the first eight was that the Pure Abodes were developmental; most people could not access them, and admitting that you *could* was tantamount to claiming to be an anagami, which neither monks (because of the rules of their order) nor neo-Buddhists steeped in the culture of non-disclosure were likely to do. There is, to this day, very little information online about the Pure Land jhanas. Ten years ago, there was even less. So it was left to me to explore this territory on my own, and see what I could see. Since I was initially able to access only two such states, the fact that five pure abodes were listed on the 31 Realms map was provocative in the extreme. My interest in nirodha samapatti, which was also said to be accessible only to anagamis and arahats, tied in with this; I wondered if NS might be one of the five realms in question.

I worked on expanding my understanding of these realms for about a year, and went on a retreat at the Forest Refuge for this purpose. While meditating formally, I would ride what I called the "jhanic arc" up and down through the available strata of mind, and open to the possibility that there might be another layer above the ones I knew, i.e., above the second Pure Land jhana.^[12] As a result of this targeted exploration, I found that there was such a state! A new layer opened up, a new jhana that felt as though it were from the same family as the two Pure Land jhanas. I still considered the possibility that nirodha samapatti was one these realms, but I eventually accessed five discrete Pure Land jhanas, none of which were nirodha samapatti. I asked myself if nirodha samapatti fell naturally into the sequence of the set of the pure land jhanas, and as far as I could tell, it did not. So I ended up with a set of states that can only be accessed by practitioners who have attained to at least third path: the five pure land jhanas, and nirodha samapatti. I've taught a number of people to access all five pure land jhanas. As far as I know, no one has come up with any additional jhanas, so to my knowledge this is the complete set: the four material jhanas, the four immaterial or formless jhanas, and the five Pure Land jhanas.

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Disillusionment

I had been led to believe that stream entry and certainly second and third path were so lofty and quasi-holy that by the time you had them, you'd basically be on easy street; if your life wasn't yet a cosmic bliss out, it was certainly on the way. If anyone had said I would still be depressed after the second path of enlightenment I wouldn't have believed it. But as it happened, by the standard diagnostic criteria I learned from the Mahasi system, by 1994 I *did* have second path and I was *still* depressed. By 2003, I believed I had attained third path too, but my life was still in shambles. There was a rift between what was happening and what I thought *ought* to be happening. On the one hand, I was a meditation expert; I had a high level of facility with altered states, knew a great deal of Buddhist theory, and had had myriad fascinating and profound experiences. I could easily access jhanas, and use them to temporarily remedy my problematic mind states, but it wasn't enough. Depression and anxiety continued. It seemed to me that my brain chemistry was seriously fouled up, and this movement via my meditation practice through what I thought of as an organic, somehow biological spectrum of development was not addressing my mental health issues. I was becoming resigned to the conclusion that meditation would help me accept my depression but would not help me overcome it. I bitterly came to terms with my depression as a long-term, chronic problem that might be with me for the rest of my life; in 1999, I begged a friend to take me by the hand to the county mental health clinic and help me ask the doctor for antidepressant medication.

My spiritual opening on LSD in 1982 had sent me on a quest for enlightenment, and I was still caught up in that current. The feeling that I was on a ride towards enlightenment consumed me. Although I wouldn't have been able to articulate it at the time, what I really wanted was to be done with it; I wanted the ride to stop. My meditation practice was a blessing and a curse, because I was moving along this developmental continuum in ways that were rich and fulfilling, and yet it was torture to wake up each morning with the feeling that something important remained to be done. I didn't know how to proceed. My practice had given me access to entirely new categories of pleasant mind states, but this access was not reliable. Instability was the curse of third path. I kept practicing only because I didn't know what else to do.

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Off the Ride

In June of 2004, I went on a retreat at Southwest Sangha in New Mexico. One day, walking under a pepper tree in the desert, I gave myself permission to be enlightened. I had been practicing obsessively for twenty-two years, including a cumulative three years on intensive retreat. I thought of myself as a professional yogi. On this day in New Mexico, reflecting on the question "have I suffered enough?" I gave myself permission to be done. I was acutely aware of everything around me — the sights and sounds of the desert, the feeling of heat on my skin, the warm breeze on my face, the pulsing in my veins. It suddenly occurred to me that I was done.

The current that had carried me for so many years had relaxed. The ride that had begun the day I first saw the white light in 1982, this thing that had taken hold of me and had been the most important thing in my life for these twenty two years, was over.

I felt like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, clicking her heels three times, and then waking up to find that she'd been home in her own bed the whole time, safe and sound. I called my mother the next day and told her what had happened. "I think I've just wasted twenty-two years of my life. The ride is over and nothing much has changed. But I have never been happier. There is peace."

The essential realization that comes from this process is that there isn't anyone here to get enlightened. You work tirelessly for years to get enlightened, only to find out that you couldn't possibly get enlightened, because there isn't anybody here for it to happen to. Contemplative development, in its purest sense, is learning to see yourself as process.

I walked back into my little trailer in the desert and wrote on the calendar, "I see the elephant." This was a reference to the parable of the blind men and the elephant.^[14] I'd been able to see parts of the puzzle before, but now it came together. I saw the elephant.

My depression went away. I weaned myself off of antidepressants and anti-anxiety medication over a period of several months. I stopped having trouble sleeping. It does not happen this way for everyone, but this is what happened to me.

By the way, what is an *arahat*? According to Theravada Buddhism, an arahat is a "fully enlightened" being. This person has attained all four of the Four Paths of enlightenment. Some say arahats are extremely rare, although in the time of the Buddha, they were apparently as common as ants at a picnic. Whether there are few arahats or many, or for that matter, any at all, depends entirely upon the definition of the word. By one popular definition, an arahat is a kind of superman who has transcended human emotions. He has "overcome greed, hatred, and delusion." In other words, he does not experience *or express* fear, anger, hate, lust, envy, nor any other "afflictive" emotion. By this definition, it's not surprising that there don't seem to be many around. In fact, I doubt there ever was a person like that, Siddhatta Gotama Buddha included.

My own preferred definition is much less ambitious and, I believe, much more useful. Moreover, I believe it is what the people who originally coined the word meant when they said it. An arahat is someone who has come to the end of a particular developmental process. The process of which I speak is familiar to anyone who has had a spiritual opening. Once it is set in motion, there is a kind of visceral pull that propels one to practice more. There is the feeling that one is moving toward...something...one knows not what. But there is the pull. It will not be denied, and ignore it at your peril. Almost all yogis know this pull. But some yogis also know the end of it. These yogis are arahats.

An arahat is not a superman. An arahat is off the ride. Viewed through this lens, the old stories suddenly make sense. According to the suttas, it was fairly routine for someone to walk up to the Buddha and say something like "Done is what needed to be done." Why did they say it like that? Because that's what it feels like. How do I know? Because it happened to me on June 13th, 2004, while walking under a pepper tree in New Mexico. A circuit was completed that day. A palpable energy that had been working its way through my body for 22 years completed its circuit and has been recycling ever since, stable, without any sense that anything else needs to be done.

It would be impossible to overstate what a profound change this caused in my understanding of my own life. The pull I spoke of earlier, the sense of "being on a ride," and needing to see it through to its conclusion, had formed the backdrop for nearly my entire adult life. Suddenly, it was over. What should I do now? At the very least, I would have to find another project. All of

this was clear in a moment. I chuckled, turned to an imaginary Buddha standing next to me and said, “Done is what needed to be done. You got nothin’ on me now.” I understood that there was not, had never been a Buddha outside of me. I was finally free... and yet it wasn’t me. It was just a constellation of thoughts and sensations conveniently designated Kenneth.

There is infinite opportunity for misunderstanding here, so I want to be as clear as possible. Being done refers only to the attainment of a particular landmark along a natural developmental continuum. It does not mean, contrary to hyperbolic legend, that the arahat has “erased all karma,” “perfected him or herself,” etc. Those are children’s stories, told by charlatans or starry-eyed apologists (or pre-industrial quasi-biographers who depended on mythic deeds as a vehicle for their stories).

Simply being enlightened will not magically transform you into a glow-in-the-dark saint. It won’t necessarily even make you a good person. The evidence for this is all around us, as we see that it is not exceptional, but rather the norm, for enlightened teachers to get caught with their pants down. If we were to give up our childish expectations of saintly behavior from our sages, we would not have to feign surprise when they succumb to the same human temptations that plague the rest of us.

I understand that many will not accept my definition of enlightenment. They will mumble something about “higher standards” and go on believing in superheroes. But I think there may be some who are ready to take a mature and realistic look at what enlightenment can and cannot do for us as individuals and as a society. For them, the empowerment of knowing that enlightenment, even to the level of arahat, is possible, will outweigh the disappointment of having to give up the fantasy of infinite wisdom, moral perfection, and steady-state bliss.

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Full Circle

After my New Mexico retreat, I drove to Barre, MA, and worked at Insight Meditation Society on and off for about a year and a half in the maintenance and IT departments. Almost immediately after arriving at IMS, I met my wife, Beth, who worked in the retreat center as a cook.

My chronic depression, which had left me dysfunctional for months at a time throughout my adult life, was gone, and I no longer felt the need to subordinate everything else to my spiritual quest. I was able to get my life together. I went back to school and earned a bachelor’s degree in Spanish literature and culture, and a master’s degree in second language education, both from the State University of New York. While still in school, I began teaching meditation over Skype and I’ve since become a full-time meditation teacher, making my living doing something I enjoy and passionately believe in. Beth and I stayed together, and were married in 2008.

The relief that comes from having gotten off the ride isn’t what I thought it would be; it is not a cosmic bliss-out or a perpetual beatific smile, but rather a deep, abiding sense of peace, and the

feeling that there's no longer anything missing from my life or the universe. This doesn't prevent my taking on projects, having goals and motivations and seeing them through, or caring about my life and the people and things around me. Nor does it erase the difficulties of an ordinary human life. Life continues as before, but with less sting. Contentment underlies all, much as the deep sea underlies the froth on the surface of the waves. Even the most violent storms do not disturb those depths.

No description of awakening is adequate. If you get there, you will be surprised, no matter what you hear or read in the meantime. In response to my questions about enlightenment during the early years of my practice, Bill Hamilton used to say, "Highly recommended. Can't tell you why." I'll end my story here, not because my story has ended, but because it hasn't; my story is ongoing and will not tidily fit within these pages. Indeed, my life has changed as much in the last nine years (since that day in the desert) as in any nine-year period of my life. I have not retired or put myself out to pasture. I teach, learn, meditate, spend time with my wife, family, and community, and run a business. But my purpose in teaching meditation is not to make clones of myself; I see contemplative fitness as analogous to physical fitness. Every individual is unique. Your contemplative fitness will be your own. There is no universal ideal, and no predetermined outcome.

If you want to be strong, lift weights. If you want to be well-educated, go to school. If you want to awaken, meditate. The rest of this book will show you how.

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1. The first of the four paths is called stream entry, and is discussed in greater detail in Chapter X as part of the method. ↵
 2. I will be presenting my interpretation of these stages in Chapter X, "Get Stream Entry", as one tried and true programs for developing contemplative fitness, a method I have seen work for dozens of students. ↵
 3. I no longer view the four paths model and the progress of insight map as the only way to model contemplative development, but it is a useful tool (lens) for diagnostics and teaching that consistently leads to results. ↵
 4. More on this in Chapter X. ↵
 5. I will present the jhanas as part of the method, in Chapters X, Y. ↵
 6. It's worth pointing out that I don't consider myself the final arbiter of other people's attainments. I'm not in a position to validate or invalidate other people's attainments; I can only give my opinion. An attainment either happens or it doesn't, irrespective of anyone's opinion including the teacher and the student herself. ↵
 7. I had secretly done some of this kind of practice on my Asian retreats too, without telling anyone. ↵
 8. I was probably following instructions from the Visudimagga, of which Bill had a copy, and the "One by one as they occur" sutta (MN 111). ↵
 9. The Pure Land jhanas and nirodha samapatti are discussed in more detail in Chapter X. ↵
 10. Nibbana is the Pali word for the Sanskrit Nirvana. ↵
 11. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/ptf/dhamma/sagga/loka.html> ↵
 12. "Riding the jhanic arc", a method I invented for accessing and developing strata of mind, is discussed in Chapter X. ↵
 13. Suttas (Pali) or sutras (Sanskrit) are the Buddhist scriptures that record the oral teachings of the Buddha. ↵
 14. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant ↵

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Watering Down the Dharma

I have been accused of “watering down the dharma.” By defining an *arahat* (also *arhat* and *arahant*) as someone who has “gotten off the ride” and can see experience as process, as opposed to a cartoon saint, I have ruffled more than a few feathers. Here are some questions, along with my responses:

Why are you redefining the Four Paths of Theravada Buddhism?

There is an old joke in which a man is asked, “Do you still beat your wife?”

The person being asked is put into an untenable situation by the false assumption built into the question. The assumption is that you have beaten your wife in the past. If you answer “no,” the questioner will follow up with “when did you stop?”

Best to reject the question entirely.

Why are you redefining the Four Paths?

I reject the question. It is false to assume that there is One Right Way to interpret ancient texts, providing an infallible orthodoxy against which all other interpretations must be compared and inevitably found lacking. There is no One Right Way.

The authors who penned the early Buddhist texts are no longer available for comment. We can only guess at their intentions. Modern commentators who insist that they know the original meaning of *arahat* are overplaying their hand, regardless of how scholarly or ostensibly traditional their arguments.

Like everyone else who has an opinion about this, I am simply throwing my hat into the ring; I offer one possible interpretation of the Four Paths model. This interpretation is based on the Pali

Canon and commentaries, rooted in observed reality, and nurtured by pragmatism. Implausible claims are sooner discarded than taken at face value. But even after discarding the implausible, the unprovable, and the downright silly, what is left is too good to ignore; enlightenment is much more than a myth, it happens to real people in our own time, and it can be systematically developed through known practices.

It seems likely that the Buddhist definition of “fully enlightened” changed over time in a kind of slow motion frenzy of one-upmanship. Here is a passage from palikanon.com, attributed to W.G. Weeraratne, author of several books on Buddhism and editor-in-chief of the prodigiously researched Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, published by the government of Sri Lanka:

In its usage in early Buddhism the term [arahant] denotes a person who had gained insight into the true nature of things (yathābhūtañāna). In the Buddhist movement the Buddha was the first arahant... The Buddha is said to be equal to an arahant in point of attainment, the only distinction being that the Buddha was the pioneer on the path to that attainment, while arahants are those who attain the same state having followed the path trodden by the Buddha.

http://www.palikanon.com/english/pali_names/ay/arahat.htm

Note that “insight into the true nature of things” sounds as though it might be within reach of anyone. (In a moment, we’ll discuss what the early Buddhists believed this “true nature” to be.) And indeed it was not the least bit unusual for people practicing the Buddha’s system to become “fully enlightened arahats” according to early Buddhist texts. But look what happened next: But, as time passed, the Buddha-concept developed and special attributes were assigned to the Buddha. A Buddha possesses the six fold super-knowledge (chalabhiññā); he has matured the thirty-seven limbs of enlightenment (bodhipakkhika dhamma); in him compassion (karunā) and insight (paññā) develop to their fullest; all the major and minor characteristics of a great man (mahāpurisa) appear on his body; he is possessed of the ten powers (dasa bala) and the four confidences (catu vesārajja); and he has had to practise the ten perfections (pāramitā) during a long period of time in the past.

When speaking of arahants these attributes are never mentioned together, though a particular arahant may have one, two or more of the attributes discussed in connection with the Buddha (S.II.217, 222). In the Nidāna Samyutta (S.II.120-6) a group of bhikkhus who proclaimed their attainment of arahantship, when questioned by their colleagues about it, denied that they had developed the five kinds of super-knowledge—namely, psychic power (iddhi-vidhā), divine ear (dibba-sota), knowledge of others’ minds (paracitta-vijānana), power to recall to mind past births (pubbenivāsānussati) and knowledge regarding other peoples’ rebirths (cutū-papatti)—and declared that they had attained arahantship by developing wisdom (paññā-vimutti).

http://www.palikanon.com/english/pali_names/ay/arahat.htm

Hmmm... So it looks as though the meanings of the words *Buddha* and *arahat* changed over time, with more and more powers and attributes layered on. Eventually, the lists of things arahats could do and the lists of things they had left behind became so long that no living person, past or present could reasonably be expected to make the cut. This is where we find ourselves today, assuming we believe the currently popular (among Buddhists) kitchen-sink version of enlightenment.

Let’s go back to the beginning for a moment.

“In its usage in early Buddhism the term [arahat] denotes a person who had gained insight into the true nature of things.”

It would be useful to know what the early Buddhists may have meant by the “true nature of things.” Here is more from Weeraratne:

At the outset, once an adherent realised the true nature of things, i.e., that whatever has arisen (samudaya-dhamma) naturally has a ceasing-to-be (nirodhā-dhamma), he was called an arahant...

http://www.palikanon.com/english/pali_names/ay/arahat.htm

Are you seeing what I'm seeing? Not only is full enlightenment (arahatship) a perfectly reasonable thing for ordinary people to aspire to and attain, the Buddha himself was initially considered just another enlightened man, albeit the first of his group. All that was required was to see that anything that "has arisen, naturally has a ceasing-to-be." (And may I humbly submit that this is precisely what I mean when I advocate learning to see this experience as process. While trivial as a mere concept, the ability to see this in real time is life-changing.) I find this empowering beyond words. Although I would be perfectly willing to dispense with Buddhism entirely if it did not have anything to offer us at this point in our history, I love the fact that 2500 years ago, humans discovered a technology for mental development that still works today. And I love the fact that once you strip away the accretions of thousands of years of can-you-top-this storytellers, it all seems perfectly do-able to us ordinary folks. It *is* perfectly do-able, of course, and this is my entire point.

In interpreting ancient Buddhist maps, it is necessary to begin with a few assumptions. Here are mine: I begin with the assumption that the chroniclers of early Buddhism were pointing to something that was happening around them (or to them), but were limited by the obligatory biography-as-hagiography storytelling style of their day. I continue with the assumption that what was possible in the 5th Century BCE is still possible today. Next, I strip away the implausible and preserve the plausible. It is implausible that ancient meditators defied gravity, traveled through time, performed miracles, or overcame their human biology. On the other hand, it is plausible that awakening, as it was then understood, was commonplace among meditators in the time of the Buddha. (A common theme of early Buddhist documents is that nearly everyone who did the Buddha's practice became fully enlightened.) I conclude that there is an organic process of development that results from meditation. It need not be mystical or magical, and we can just as easily think of it as brain development. Finally, and most importantly, I reality-test these assumptions with observations of present day humans, using my subjective experience, interviews with other meditators, and the carefully documented reports of present-day meditators available in books and online forums.

Before I present a side-by-side comparison of two competing models of arahatship, we might reasonably ask whether a stage model of contemplative development has any value at all. I believe it does. Humans learn best when they are given discreet goals and regular assessments of progress. I have heard the protestations of those who believe that meditation must never be a goal-oriented activity, and that this holy truth renders all stage models either counterproductive or irrelevant. I refer such people to the success of my students. And for those who crave a more authoritative (authoritarian?) voice, I would point out that according to that most definitive of Buddhist sources, the Pali Canon, the dying words of the Buddha were "Strive diligently." We can compare and contrast my model (let's call it the *Pragmatic Model*) with a model that is currently in vogue among Buddhists, and which we might reasonably call the *Saint Model*. First, the definitions:

The Pragmatic Model of Arahatsip

These people know they are done; they have come to the end of seeking. Although they may continue to meditate with great enthusiasm, and continue to deepen and refine important aspects of their understanding throughout their lives, they do not feel there is anything they

need to do vis a vis their own awakening. This is in marked contrast to the pre-arahat meditator, who tends to be obsessed with meditation and progress. Equally important, the Pragmatic Model arahat is able to see experience as process. There is no enduring sense of self at the center of experience. The Buddhist ideal of insight into not-self has been completely realized and integrated.

The Saint Model of Arahatship

This person does not suffer. No negative emotion is felt *or expressed*. Ever. (I have emphasized the *expression* of negative emotions because there will always be individuals who claim not to feel negative emotions even while expressing them in a way that is obvious to everyone around them. Doesn't count.) No anger, resentment, annoyance, irritation, aversion, impatience, or restlessness is allowed. There is no sensual desire, and this applies to both food and sex. This person cannot compare himself/herself with others, either favorably or unfavorably. This person is unable to lie, steal, speak harshly, or kill a sentient being, including insects. Did I mention omniscience and diverse psychic powers including mind reading? This person is a saint by the most rigorous interpretation of the word.

Comparing the models

For a developmental model to be relevant to modern humans, it should describe something that actually happens and can be observed today. It should happen often enough to form a reasonable sample size for study. The Pragmatic Model does this. I estimate that I have communicated with 20-30 people who might be considered arahats by this model. Since I personally know only a tiny fraction of the humans on Earth, it is reasonable to assume that this is only the tip of the iceberg, and there are many hundreds or thousands of such people whom I have not yet met.

By contrast, the Saint Model is a high bar indeed. I have never met anyone who could approach it, in spite of the fact that in the natural course of my life, first as dedicated seeker, and later as meditation teacher, I have met many highly accomplished and/or revered meditators. As for dead saints, in many cases there is little record of the phenomenology of their day-to-day experience, either subjective or as observed by others. In cases where there *is* such a record, candidates are quickly eliminated from the Saint Model for displaying or reporting unseemly amounts of human behavior.

A useful model describes a repeatable process and has clear metrics for success. The Pragmatic Model identifies specific phenomena that are experienced by the meditator at each stage along a typical sequence of events. (See, for example, the Progress of Insight section of this book, and my criteria for attainment of each of the Four Paths.) The Saint Model, on the other hand, does not offer clear metrics for success, either in the beginning or the middle. In the end, you will know you have achieved it because you will never experience or express irritation, and you will lose your enjoyment of food.

The Hercules Effect: Why “watering down” a high standard might be a good idea

In Greco-Roman mythology, Hercules was the very embodiment of physical fitness. He did a great deal of slaying and capturing in his illustrious career, and even had time to hold up the world for a moment when Atlas needed a break. Hercules was invincible and almost infinitely strong. Compared to Hercules, the most decorated athletes of our own day are scarcely worth

mentioning. Hercules would outbox Mike Tyson with one hand while simultaneously defeating Serena Williams at tennis and Michael Jordan (in his prime!) at basketball. Are we watering down our definition of physical fitness by not believing in Hercules? Or are we simply acknowledging that Hercules is but a myth and is therefore not relevant to us as we probe the limits of human excellence?

Similarly, we can dispense with the myth of enlightened sainthood and concentrate on what actually happens to flesh and blood humans when they meditate. We can define enlightenment/awakening in a way that comports with observed reality. A four paths model that is teachable and learnable is infinitely more interesting than one that never happens.

We stopped believing in Hercules some time ago. Perhaps it's time to stop believing in magical cartoon saints. This is an eminently practical step, as letting go of our fantasies allows us to focus on meditation in earnest. And effective meditation practice allows us to realize the remarkable benefits of awakening for ourselves, rather than through the intermediary of an imagined champion.

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[Fluency with the the Ladder of Abstraction →](#)

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Fluency with the the Ladder of Abstraction

Neuroscience informs us that everything we experience is a representation in the brain. We have no direct pipeline to the external world. I see a wall across the room. It is beige, with white trim, and littered with purple sticky notes in book outline form. But my experience of that wall is a mental construct based on photons hitting my eyes or pressure sensations hitting my fingers. Some mystics have intuitively realized this and concluded that external reality is therefore an illusion. I find this conclusion fallacious. I have every reason to believe that 20 years from now other people will still be able to see and touch the wall across the room, and cover it with their own sticky notes. The external world is not an illusion. But my experience of it is an abstraction. What this means is that even when I go as low as possible on a ladder of abstraction, it is *still* an abstraction. Fine. Fair enough. For our purposes, it is sufficient to identify a continuum of abstraction from lower to higher.

Lower levels of abstraction are, by definition, more grounded in the five physical senses. Higher levels allow the naming of things, memories, projections of imaginary worlds, and manipulation of concepts. Dogs, cats, birds, lizards, and snails have access to lower levels of abstraction, but cannot go as high as we can on the ladder. They can experience input from the five senses, and create a mental representation of their environment. Some non-human animals can even abstract to the level of assigning labels to things. But they presumably cannot do math or spin multiple elaborate scenarios about the future. They cannot be architects or diagnosticians. The ability to move high on the ladder of abstraction is uniquely human (at least on this planet) and it has served us well. We are fruitful. We multiply. And there is the individual payoff; if you can

out-plan your neighbor, you will prosper. But there is a cost. There is a cost! Higher levels of abstraction are inherently agitating. We are happy to pay the cost because the payoff is so great. Still... the cost. Our inability to return to low levels of abstraction makes us sick and kills us early. We are awash in a sea of stress and anxiety. We must re-learn the art of climbing back down the ladder of abstraction. We must learn to be simple sometimes. Not all the time. Sometimes. One of the benefits of meditation, one of the specialties held under the over-arching umbrella of contemplative fitness, is the art of simplicity. To go low on the ladder of abstraction. To breathe. To relax.

With this in mind, we can identify *fluency* as a core value and a core competency within contemplative fitness. We can train ourselves to access the ladder of abstraction in its entirety, from low to high, and back down again.

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The three speed transmission

The three speed transmission is a conceptual framework for understanding the ways in which contemplative practices from various traditions complement one another. It grew out of my need to make sense of the different, often contradictory teachings and techniques I encountered from various contemplative traditions and teachers. Think of it as a tree to hang your knowledge on. It will help you organize your thoughts. This kind of knowledge tree is called a schema. Here is the three speed transmission schema in a nutshell:

First gear: What?

Second gear: Who?

Third gear: Stop practicing; this is it.

At a slightly higher level of detail, here it is again:

First Gear: Bring attention to the experience of this moment. Objectify (take as object) the simple phenomena of the six sense doors, which are seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling, and thinking. Pure concentration practices also fall under the First Gear heading.

Second Gear: Bring attention to the apparent knower of this experience. Typical guiding questions are “Who am I?” or “To whom is this happening?”

Third Gear: This is it. It’s over. Surrender to the situation as it is in this moment. Then, go beyond even surrender, to the simple acknowledgement that this moment is as it is, with or without your approval. Even your effort to surrender is a presumption, a last-ditch effort to control the situation; by agreeing to surrender, you imply that you have a choice, as though you could choose *not* to surrender. This is not so. You are not in charge. You are the kid in the the back seat with the plastic steering wheel. This moment is already here and nothing you can do or not do in this moment will change it.

Here is a third iteration of the schema with a partial list of practices that correspond to each gear:

First gear:

- 1) Vipassana meditation, with or without following the breath, noting aloud or silently, Burmese Mahasi-style, interactively or alone; body scanning vipassana, as taught in the U Ba Kin/Goenka tradition of Burma.
- 2) Pure concentration practices like mantra (repeating a word); gazing at an object; counting the breath; repeating metta (lovingkindness) or compassion phrases; focusing on feelings of metta or compassion; concentrating on a conceptual object, i.e., visualization of deities, lights, or physical objects.
- 3) Ecstatic dancing, whirling, or speaking in tongues.

Second gear:

Self-enquiry as taught in Advaita Vedanta; hua tou as taught in Chinese Zen (Chan) and Korean Zen (Seon).

Third Gear:

Shikantaza (just sitting), as taught in Japanese Soto Zen; turning toward the “un-manifest” as in Mahamudra or Dzogchen practices; “Just stop!” as taught by Advaita teacher Poonja-ji. Being reminded by a teacher that you are “already enlightened” or that you “cannot do it wrong,” as taught by some neo-advaita teachers, e.g., Ganga-ji, Mooji.

When I first became interested in contemplative practice, I read a number of Zen books that made reference to “awakening” or “enlightenment.” It seemed to be some nebulous sort of wisdom that Zen masters had. The reader was often encouraged to abandon the quest for enlightenment, even though enlightenment was clearly the goal. If one could just adopt the right attitude, enlightenment would arise; but if you tried to “get” it, you would fail. Paradox was everywhere. The aspirant must understand that there is “nowhere to go, nothing to get.” That sort of thing. It was never clear to me how I could duplicate this highly touted but under-explained wisdom in my own life. As a westerner who did not have access to traditional Japanese culture, and who grew up with the understanding that learning resulted from a fairly straightforward process of education, I found the Zen approach less than helpful.

Since I never felt called to put on a black robe and join a Zen center, I was on my own. I didn’t know how to develop my meditation practice other than to read books about it and sit for thirty minutes a day counting my breath from one to ten (a practice I had learned from a Zen book). I sensed progress in my meditation practice throughout this time, but I had the distinct feeling that I was missing something and that my practice was inefficient.

When I met Bill Hamilton in 1990, he told me about the Theravada Buddhist four paths of enlightenment and the Progress of Insight map. During this time, I also learned that according to the Pali suttas, the dying words of the Buddha were “appamadena sampadetha,” which means “strive diligently.”

This linear, goal-oriented approach made sense to me, given my own cultural influences, and I was immediately able to put this simple concept to work; the more I practiced, the more I progressed. Thirty minutes a day was not enough; I practiced more, understanding that progress was proportional to time spent training. And technique mattered; Mahasi-style mental noting, with its built-in feedback loop and systematic way of including all aspects of experience, was sure to be more efficient than simple breath-counting. “Aha!” I thought. “*There is somewhere to go and something to get.*” It was clear that the Pali Buddha¹ wasn’t into this nebulous “you can’t get there from here” baloney at all. My practice took off like a rocket. Here was a straightforward, systematic pedagogy, and it worked. Vipassana seemed to make Zen irrelevant. But that wasn’t the end of the story.

In the early nineties, while living and meditating intensively in a Burmese-style Mahasi monastery in Malaysia, I met an American Zen practitioner who said that the Burmese vipassana approach was wrong-headed and that the Zen people had it right after all. He insisted that the striving that was part and parcel of the Burmese vipassana scene was just the initial practice and that eventually you had to grow up, stop banging your head against the wall and let things be as they are. I spent many hours arguing with this fellow, but it was clear to me that he had a valid point of view that wasn't being expressed by my Burmese teachers. I chewed on this for several years, flip-flopping between thinking that the Burmese were right and the Japanese clueless, and then deciding that the Japanese were right after all, and so on.

In the early and mid 2000s, I became fascinated with Advaita Vedanta and the process of self-enquiry as taught by Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta. Here was yet another lens: you didn't have to pay attention to anything other than the apparent self, and by asking the question "who am I?" you could deconstruct this sticky illusion and lose the sense of self forever, essentially solving all of your problems. Self-enquiry had the benefit of simplicity; rather than the myriad changing objects of vipassana, there was only one. It was arguably harder to get lost while meditating, since the task was to keep the attention firmly on the question "who am I?" From the point of view of Advaita, neither Zen breath-counting, nor Zen surrender, nor Burmese vipassana have much to offer;² it's all about directly investigating the apparent self. All questions are immediately redirected to self-enquiry. Who cares what is happening? Only ask to whom it is happening. The recursion of this approach creates a practice that is both elegantly simple and completely self-contained. I liked it, and I jumped into the practice with both feet; my pendulum swung again and I became dismissive of both Zen and vipassana. Ramana Maharshi became my hero and I spat on anyone who wasn't hip enough to practice self-enquiry to the exclusion of all else.

For many years, I was unable to see how these perspectives could be reconciled; I gravitated toward whatever felt right at the time and declared it the best and only practice. Again and again I was blinkered by the narrowness of my own perspective. Gradually, though, my viewpoint began to broaden. I could no longer deny that all of these seemingly contradictory systems had value, and more specifically that I had benefited from all of them.

I needed a conceptual framework big and flexible enough to hold the striving of the Pali Buddha, the self-enquiry of Advaita, and the surrender of Zen. I put them in that order, i.e., 1) "What?" as in "what is happening?" 2) "Who?" as in "to whom is it happening" and 3) "Stop practicing because this is it." The three speed transmission was born. And by about 2005, I was able to see a way to integrate all three understandings into a method, using one to scaffold the next. The three speed transmission allows us to step back and see the bigger picture, allowing for the possibility that any given perspective can have great value within its sphere and that there is no one lens to rule them all.

In the end, there is no hierarchy. "Stop practicing because this is it" is not a higher-level understanding than the simple reality of the six sense doors (seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling, and thinking), as viewed through vipassana noting practice. Nor is self-enquiry to be privileged over either of the other lenses. In fact, the ability to switch fluently among lenses is a hallmark of mature practice and mature understanding. There is no one lens to rule them all. As Croatian Buddhist teacher Hokai Sobol says, "every perspective both reveals and obscures." Each lens is valid within its sphere, and effective practice becomes a simple and practical matter of applying the appropriate lens in any given moment.

The three speed transmission approach encourages you to adopt whatever lens is most helpful in a particular situation. If you observe the comings and goings of your own experience, you can see thoughts and body sensations arising and passing away. All of these phenomena can be

perceived *out there*; I can see the computer in front of me, the man sitting at the next table in the coffee shop; I can hear the conversations going on around me, the background music playing through the sound system; I can taste my coffee; I can recognize my own thoughts and internal dialogue as I think of these examples. The practice of looking at the objects of the six senses [Buddhist theory identifies six senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling, and thinking. In this system, thinking is the sixth sense. It is valuable to see experience this way as it counters the tendency to privilege thinking as somehow more "me" than other phenomena. Ultimately, all phenomena, including the momentarily arising sense of "I" share equal status; none is to be privileged over any other.] is vipassana. We can place this in the first gear category.

In addition to all of the objects arising within experience, there is often the sense that all of this is happening *to me*. All of this stuff happening *out there* is being perceived by me *in here*. I'm looking out at something, so *I* must be the one who is looking. In second gear, we investigate this sense of subject, this sense of *I* to whom all of this is happening. Any practice that directly targets the apparent sense of self falls into the category of second gear.

It could be argued that third gear, in its purest form, is not really a practice at all; it is complete acknowledgement of and surrender to the situation as it is. Such is the intention behind the "just sitting" practice of Soto Zen as well as certain practices within the Tibetan Buddhist traditions of Dzogchen and Mahamudra.

Understanding that the best practice is the one that is most beneficial in this moment, we can leave behind a big bucket of unnecessary suffering. When a practitioner laments the fact that she is not able to sustain herself in third gear all the time, for example, a quick detour to second gear would call into question this "self" who needs to have a particular experience. And downshifting to first gear allows for the invaluable feedback loop of noting (labeling) in order to stay on track with minimal space-outs while also reducing experience to its bare components, devoid of unnecessary rumination and worry.

The gearshift analogy points up the fact that it is possible to get more traction with noting (1st gear) than with self-enquiry (2nd gear) or surrender (3rd gear). Third gear practice is best done when there is already a good deal of momentum. The automobile transmission idea initially came from something I heard Shinzen Young say many years ago: when things were tough, he would downshift to mindfulness of the body (vipassana) as a kind of "first gear." Once he got up a head of steam, he might shift gears to another practice, perhaps Zen *shikantaza* (just sitting). I found Shinzen's downshifting idea extremely helpful and later developed it into a three-gear model, briefly flirting with a 5-speed transmission along the way.

The three speed transmission schema ties in with the idea of the yogi toolbox. There are many powerful practices for training the mind. Ideally, we collect a toolbox full of effective techniques over a lifetime. And the most important tool in the box is a kind of *meta-tool* that allows you to select the practice most appropriate to any given moment. This, of course, is in direct opposition to the idea that you should choose one technique and practice it for a lifetime. I don't know anything about that, because I've always been eclectic and experimental in my own practice. This dynamic approach has worked for me, and this is how I teach.

Like all taxonomies, the three speed transmission is descriptive rather than prescriptive; it is not intended to tell reality how to be, but rather to give human beings a conceptual framework for understanding the reality of meditation practice as it presents itself. As such, the model is not perfect. You will be able to identify contemplative practices that do not fit neatly into any of the three categories. In such a case, the model has done its job; an exception to the model is made possible by the conceptual framework provided by the model, thus continuing to build out a scaffold upon which to hang further learning.

Notes:

1. Although both the Pali and Sanskrit texts are ostensibly about the same historical figure, the pictures painted by these collections of stories diverge; the Buddha of the Pali Canon is fierce, clear in his communication, and uncompromising in his dedication to excellence while the Buddha of the Sanskrit texts often appears easy-going and vague. This is what I mean when I say “Pali Buddha” or “Sanskrit Buddha.” ↵
2. In all fairness to the vast and multi-faceted Zen tradition, self-enquiry is emphasized in Korean Zen (Seon or Son), and some schools of Chinese Zen (Chan). ↵

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The progress of insight map

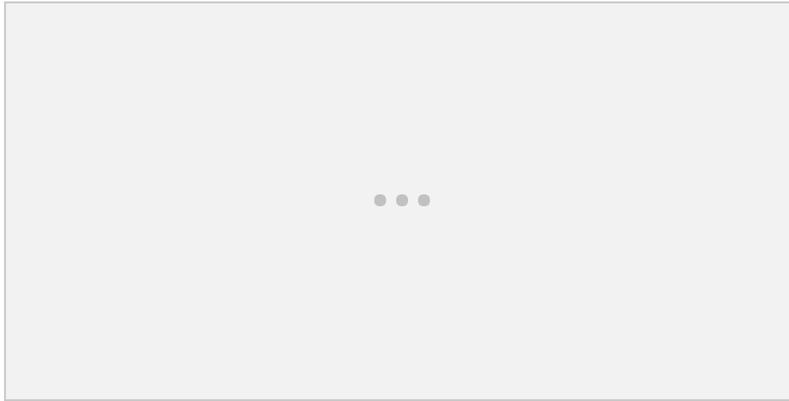
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(Editor's note: Introduce and define the Progress of Insight Map before describing it in detail.)

The following is a description of how the Progress of Insight stages might be experienced by an idealized meditator.

If the Progress of Insight were plotted on a graph, it would start out flat, rise until reaching a peak event, descend into a trough, stabilize, and then resolve.



The Progress of Insight

1. The opening act is the flat line at the left, understanding that the cycle moves from left to right. (As it is a cycle, this whole process might be more accurately represented as a circle, but I have deliberately chosen a linear graph for ease of understanding.) In traditional language, what I am calling the opening act includes the first two insight knowledges: Knowledge of Mind and Body and Knowledge of Cause and Effect. ¹
2. The ascent. The third insight knowledge, Knowledge of the Three Characteristics.
3. The peak. The fourth and fifth insight knowledges, Knowledge of the Arising and Passing Away of Phenomena and Knowledge of Dissolution, respectively.
4. The descent. The 6th through 10th insight knowledges: Fear, Misery, Disgust, Desire for Deliverance, and Re-observation. These are collectively referred to as the dukkha ñanas or the dark night of the soul.
5. Consolidation and Resolution. Includes the 11th insight knowledge, Knowledge of Equanimity, the 12th through 16th insight knowledges, including Path and Fruition, all five of which are said to happen in one moment, completing the cycle, and the 17th insight knowledge, Review.

Even though not everyone will recognize all of the stages or experience them as described, the general arc holds true in most cases. It's usually easier to recognize the stages on hindsight.

Knowledge of Mind and Body (Stage 1)

The opening stage feels solid. When our imaginary idealized meditator first begins to sit down to meditate, her experience will probably be fairly pleasant and unremarkable.

Soon after starting, she will have her first insight: seeing that the mind and the body are two separate things, with each influencing the other. She sees a thought arise as separate from "herself," the knower of the thoughts. She may notice a sensation such as an itch and recognize that it is perceived in two parts: the physical sensation itself, and the mental impression of it.

This is the beginning of a meta-awareness, a stepping back from experience to be able to dispassionately observe experience, an ability that will strengthen throughout the meditator's life.

Our imaginary yogi has reached the first insight knowledge, the aptly named Knowledge of Mind and Body. She is just beginning to settle into meditation, which can be pleasant. There's often a deep sense of calm and subtle exhilaration upon beginning a meditation practice.

Our meditator's experience at this point can be described as solid, because she doesn't yet have the perceptual resolution and acuity to see things changing at a fine level of detail. The

ability to perceive at the level of micro-sensations is the very heart of the vipassana technique and that which gives it its unique transformative power.

A traditional example can help to illustrate what is meant by solid in this context, and how objects that initially appear solid can be broken down into their component parts through careful observation:

Imagine that you are walking down a country road and you see what appears to be rope lying across the road, its ends disappearing into the brush on either side. As you draw closer, you notice that the rope is not lying still, as one would expect from a rope. It seems to be moving ever so slightly. Moving closer still, you realize that it is not a rope at all, but a line of ants crossing the road in both directions. Finally, you see that that line is composed of individual ants, each of which is composed of many constituent parts constantly in motion. The object of perception, which at first seemed to be a solid rope, is revealed to be a process rather than a thing.

This practice of deconstructing apparently solid objects of perception into their constituent parts is fundamental to the practice of *vipassana*,² which is translated into English as “seeing clearly.” The meditator at the level of the first insight knowledge, however, has not yet done this. True vipassana doesn’t begin until the fourth insight knowledge, Knowledge of the Arising and Passing Away of Phenomena. It is for this reason that the A & P, as I call it, is the most important of the insight knowledges leading up to stream entry. Our imaginary yogi is not there yet, however; next in the typical sequence of events is the second insight knowledge, Knowledge of Cause and Effect.

Knowledge of Cause and Effect (Stage 2)

The second insight knowledge is the direct, visceral understanding of what Buddhists call karma, as experienced in the meditator’s own life. She will feel in her gut the pain of her past unskillful actions and the joy of past good deeds. She may notice how recalling painful experiences or even imaginary arguments can lead to unpleasant sensations in the body. Likewise with pleasant memories: when she remembers the time she sent flowers to her mother for no reason, she will feel a deep happiness in mind and body. Our meditator is likely to be slightly less concentrated here than she was in the first stage, more prone to mind wandering and reflection, less able to stay focused on the objects of meditation, whether the sensations of breathing or the choiceless noting/noticing of various phenomena as they spontaneously arise. Like the first insight knowledge, this second stage is not necessarily a big deal in the meditator’s life and may go unnoticed.

Knowledge of the Three Characteristics (Stage 3)

The name of this insight knowledge often leads to confusion. According to early Buddhism, the three universal characteristics of existence, also known as the three marks, are unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*), and not-self (*anatta*). Therefore, given the name of this, the third of the insight knowledges according to the progress of insight map, we might expect to gain deep understanding of all three characteristics at this stage. In practice, though, this stage is just unpleasant. The body feels tight, tense, and anxious. This is the stage of back pain, numb legs, distraction, discomfort, fidgeting, and boredom.

Our meditator may become obsessed with her posture at this point, looking for just the right way to sit in order to ease her discomfort.

A common landmark of the third insight knowledge is the experience of bright, persistent itching. Many mediators report solid, unbearable itches that seem to last for minutes and become more unpleasant with attention. I call the sharp, pinpoint itch the “kiss of concentration.” If you stay with one clear itch and become interested in it, it will carry you into concentration and eventually into the fourth insight knowledge, Knowledge of the Arising and Passing Away of Phenomena. If such an itch arises, become interested in it. If you are doing freestyle noting, it’s okay to just note “itching” over and over again as you focus on this one clear object. If you are using an anchor (primary object) such as the breath, drop the breath entirely and place your attention on the itch. Become the world’s greatest authority on that itch. What does it do? Does it get stronger, clearer, brighter? Does it fade, pulse or strobe? After it fades out, stay in that area of a few moments and see if it returns. Go back to random noting or your anchor only after you are certain that you have wrung every bit of useful information out of the itch (or the pulse or the throb or pain or whatever is the predominant object).

Eventually everything will open up into champagne bubble-like sensations, unitive experiences, rising energy waves, and a general sense of well-being, signaling the arrival of the fourth stage, the A&P. But you cannot skip over the unpleasantness of the third stage in order to get to the fourth. Stay with the sensations as they are, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and let nature take its course.

The sticky places along the progress of insight are the third insight knowledge and the tenth, respectively, the ascent to the crest of the wave (3rd stage), and the descent into the trough that follows the crest (10 stage). The insight knowledge is significant in that if it is not overcome, the yogi will not progress to the all-important Arising and Passing Away of Phenomena (4th stage), and will therefore not gain access to the real fruit of contemplative practice. Having never penetrated an object of attention, the pre-4th ñāna yogi will remain forever an outsider, looking in from behind the glass as others have transformative experiences that the pre-4th ñāna yogi can only imagine. Nonetheless, the 3rd ñāna in itself does not present anything beyond ordinary human suffering. The pain is mostly physical, mostly experienced during formal meditation, and does not significantly affect the yogi’s life off the cushion. Such pre-4th ñāna yogis, of which there are many, often become religious, adopting the ideas and trappings of whatever scene they are in. They may become devoted and much-valued members of their spiritual/religious community. But they have not yet understood the real value of this practice.

Knowledge of the Arising and Passing away of Phenomena (Stage 4)

The fourth insight knowledge could be said to be the most significant event in a meditator’s career, and is often the most spectacular. This is the spiritual opening, often a completely life-changing event. This stage often involves unitive experiences, “God-union,” “the white light,” mystical visions, and sublime ecstasy. It signals the beginning of true spirituality, and while it is often mistaken for a culminating event and heralded as an experience of “enlightenment”, it is really the germination of the seed that will later come to fruition in stream entry and further developments over a lifetime.

The A&P is not a spectacular event for everyone, however; it can be a more subtle shift, with meditation becoming more pleasant and dynamic. Even if our meditator does not experience a full-blown peak experience, she will notice a change from the rough patch (3rd insight knowledge) that preceded this stage. She is likely to feel a deep gurgling joy bubbling up, rising

through the body. The A&P is a very pleasant time in meditation, bringing with it a kind of orgasmic joy that dwarfs the pleasantness of the beginning stages.

It is common to experience brightness in the visual field during meditation in this stage, as if someone just turned on the lights, even with the eyes closed. Some people feel more energetic throughout the day and have trouble sleeping. Dreams may be more vivid or intense. A kind of manic joy may be experienced.

Bill Hamilton used to say that the A&P stage marks the first time the meditator has managed to completely “penetrate the object.” To use the metaphor from earlier, our meditator is now able to see the individual ants that make up what she previously saw as a rope.

The meditator has managed to reduce a seemingly solid thing to its component parts. A body sensation that was previously experienced as a solid pain in her knee while sitting is now experienced as waves of subtle twitching sensations. The clear, persistent itch from the third insight knowledge breaks down into pulses and vibrations. Thoughts, instead of sitting in the mind like stones, are seen to arise, live out their brief existence, and then vanish cleanly into the nothingness whence they came.

Sitting is effortless at this stage, and meditators tend to see their daily hours of formal practice spike upward. It is not unusual for someone in the throws of the A&P to sit for several hours a day. For a few days around the attainment of the fourth insight knowledge, all is right with the universe. The secular yogi feels enlightened, the religious yogi feels touched by God, and both expect to live out the rest of their lives at the crest of this infinite wave.

Waves, however, are not infinite, but temporal and cyclical in nature. Returning to our graph, we see that the fourth insight knowledge exists at the very peak of the cycle.

Because following the peak of every wave is a trough, there is trouble on the horizon. Mercifully, the first part of the descent is pleasant, though that may be viewed as a knife that cuts both ways as it does not prepare the meditator for the horror of what is to come. Next in line is the fifth insight knowledge, Knowledge of Dissolution.

Knowledge of Dissolution (Stage 5)

The fifth insight knowledge, Knowledge of Dissolution, is a very chilled-out stage, especially compared to the overwhelming joy and excitement of the previous stage. If the A&P is orgasmic joy, dissolution is more akin to post-coital bliss.

Our meditator is in love with the world and everyone in it, but feels no compulsion to do anything about it. Our meditator’s experiences in meditation are noticeably more relaxed than they were in the previous stage, and she can easily sit for a long periods just grooving on the cool, diffuse, tingling sensations of the body.

The characteristic mind state of the fifth insight knowledge is bliss and the characteristic body sensations are coolness on the skin and tingles. The mental focus is diffuse; it’s possible to feel the skin all over the body, all at once. This is something that is difficult to do in any other stage, so when it happens, it’s a good indicator that you are moving through the dissolution stage. Bill Hamilton used to say of this stage that you feel like a donut; you can be aware of the edges of an object, but not the middle. During dissolution, if you try to notice fine detail within the body, or experience a single sensation clearly, or zoom in on a small area, you will become frustrated. Although zooming in to a point would have been easy at an earlier level of development, at this stage, everything is dissolving and disappearing, hence the name “dissolution.” The observing

mind is only able to perceive the passing away of objects rather than their arising. If you are able to let this happen naturally, it will be blissful, but if you fight it, it will be frustrating. The mind is markedly unproductive at this stage. Conversations are difficult and it's hard to concentrate. Attention is diffuse, often dreamy, and there's a sense of being out of focus. By the time a thought is recognized, it is already gone. This happy stupidity does not last long, however, as the *dukkha ñanas* are coming hard on its heels. We are about to enter the true low point of the cycle, territory so daunting that it has tested the resolve of many a yogi.

The Dukkha Ñanas³

The next five insight knowledges together form the most difficult part of the Progress of Insight cycle. They are collectively called the *dukkha ñanas*, the insight knowledges of suffering. I also refer to them as the dark night of the soul, after the poem by 16th Century Spanish Christian mystic Saint John of the Cross, which describes his own spiritual crisis while practicing in a very different context. (The fact that Saint John of the Cross, among others, has described this mental territory in a way that is strikingly similar to Buddhist descriptions is evidence for a developmental process the potential for which is built-in to human beings, cutting across time spans, traditions, and individuals.)

It makes sense to group the five difficult stages of the progress of insight together as the *dukkha ñanas* because not every meditator is able to distinguish the individual stages while going through them. Although the Progress of Insight map describes a very particular sequence of unpleasant experiences, many people just experience it as one big blob of suffering while going through the cycle for the first time or even after having gone through it many times.

It is not necessary to recognize each of the stages within the *dukkha ñanas* in order to make progress. It is, however, important to understand that you are highly likely to encounter difficult territory at some point. This is the value of seeing the stages laid out as a graph; meditation does not simply lead to a linear increase in happiness, and understanding this ahead of time can save a great deal of confusion. Forewarned is forearmed, and with a reasonable idea of what to expect as your own process unfolds, you will be better prepared to deal with difficulty as it arises.

Knowledge of Fear (Stage 6)

The name says it all. Following the peak experience of the fourth ñana, the Arising and Passing Away of Phenomena, our meditator's world began to dissolve. But this was not a problem for her, as the deep joy of the crest of the wave was smoothly replaced by cool bliss. Delicious tingling sensations ran down the arms and legs and thoughts disappeared before they could become the objects of obsession. Now, with the onset of the 6th ñana, Knowledge of Fear, all of that changes. The dissolution of thoughts and physical sensations continues, but the meditator now interprets it very differently; she is terrified to see her world falling apart.

About two weeks into my first three-month retreat at Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts in 1991, having already experienced the high of the A&P (4th ñana) and the bliss of Knowledge of Dissolution (5th ñana), I was passing the time before lunch by doing walking meditation on the ancient, no-longer-used bowling alley of the former manor house when I was overcome by a wave of abject terror. The hardwood floor of the bowling alley no longer felt solid beneath my

stockinged feet. The stark colors of the floor and walls punished my eyes and the walls themselves seemed to writhe and twist as I watched them. I pushed my hand against the wall beside me, seeking something solid. The wall felt spongy. I fell to my knees on the hardwood floor, oblivious to other yogis who may have been passing by, and pushed my fingertips against the oak floor boards, desperate to find something solid. My fingers seemed to sink into the floor. Tears streamed down my face and tapped onto the wooden floor as I found myself overcome by an unspeakable dread that I could not understand.

This experience, which lasted about ten minutes, was my first full-blown taste of the sixth insight knowledge, Knowledge of Fear. As intense as it was, momentarily plunging me into what seemed like a bad acid trip from a 1960s anti-drug propaganda film, it was mercifully brief and passed cleanly away by early afternoon.

A traditional description of the sixth *ñāna* describes a mother who has just seen her husband and all but one of her sons executed. As her only surviving son prepares to suffer the same fate, the dread that his mother feels is akin to the dread of a yogi who attains to the sixth *ñāna*. Personally, I find this story a bit over the top, but it certainly gets one's attention. And while Knowledge of Fear can indeed be intense, as it was for me, for some yogis it is not spectacular at all, just unpleasant.

Knowledge of Misery (Stage 7)

The next insight knowledge to arise, the aptly named Knowledge of Misery, is number seven of the 16 insight knowledges (*ñānas*). The body writhes, the skin feels like it is crawling with bugs, and the muscles of the neck and jaw contract unpleasantly, pulling the face into a rictus. It is hard to sit still on the meditation cushion, as the whole body feels unsettled. Unpleasant sensations arise quickly and pass away before the meditator can focus on them, thus taking away one of the strategies that has served her well until now, that of focusing on unpleasant body sensations in order to become concentrated. The experiences I have listed are just some of the many possible ways in which misery can arise. Each individual will have a unique experience. The seventh *ñāna* will not last long, perhaps not more than a day or two, if that.

Knowledge of Disgust (Stage 8)

The ancient *ñāna*-naming commission once again scores a direct hit; the eighth insight knowledge, Knowledge of Disgust is just as it sounds. Food is repellant, the thought of sex is nauseating, and everyone smells bad. The nose may wrinkle up as if noticing and unpleasant odor. Again, this *ñāna* is generally short-lived.

Knowledge of Desire for Deliverance (Stage 9)

Do you know what it feels like when you are sobbing, completely at wit's end, overcome by grief and self-pity? The body shakes and rocks, and you feel the release of total surrender to your emotional pain. This is one way the ninth insight knowledge (9th *ñāna*), Knowledge of Desire for Deliverance, can manifest. One way or the other, though, Desire for deliverance is just what the name says: you want out. Out of this situation, out of this experience, even out of this life. There is a pervasive sadness, and a feeling of hopelessness. Most of all, there is aversion. But it doesn't last long and next in line is...

Knowledge of Re-Observation (Stage 10)

This is where the ancient Buddhist namers of *ñanas* fell down on the job. The innocuous-sounding Knowledge of Re-Observation, tenth of the sixteen insight knowledges, is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Books have been written about it. It is the stuff legends are made of. A better name might be Knowledge of Instability. This is the Dark Night of the Soul, and the Agony in the Garden. Although some yogis are able to pass through this stage relatively unscathed, it is common for a yogi's life to be completely disrupted by the tenth *ñana*. It is the phase referred to in Zen as the "rolling up of the mat," because the yogi has the intuitive sense that meditation is only adding to his misery, and abandons the sitting practice. The 10th *ñana* is St. John of the Cross' Dark Night of the Soul, a realm of such gut-wrenching despair that the yogi may want to abandon all worldly (and otherworldly) pursuits, pull down the shades, roll up into a ball and die. In more modern terms, the 10th *ñana* can be indistinguishable from clinical depression. Although all of the *ñanas* (insight knowledges) numbered six through eight are included in the dukkha *ñanas*, it is the 10th that causes the real hardship, as the Re-Observation stage is an iterative rehash of the Insight Knowledges of Fear, Misery, Disgust, and Desire for Deliverance, along with some nasty surprises all its own.

When the yogi attains to the crest of the wave in the fourth *ñana*, she believes that she has arrived at her destination. From here on in, she reasons, life should be a breeze. Even if she has been warned, she does not believe the warnings. She is completely unprepared for what is to come and is blindsided by the fury of the tenth *ñana*, which consists of the four previous *ñanas* of fear, misery, disgust, and desire for deliverance repeating themselves in a seemingly endless loop, and worse with each iteration. In addition, the strong concentration of the fourth *ñana* (the A&P) seems to have disappeared; one cannot escape into a pleasantly concentrated state, and there is no respite from the unpleasantness and negativity that flood the body and mind.

Actually, the yogi's practice is even more concentrated than before, but she is accessing unstable strata of mind that are not conducive to restful mind states or happy thoughts. She obsesses about her progress, is sure that she is back-sliding, and devises all manner of strategies to "get back" what she has lost. The meditation teacher tries to reassure the meditator that she is still on track, but to no avail. The best approach at this point is to come clean with the yogi, lay the map on the table, and say "You are here. I know it isn't easy, but it does not last forever. If you continue to practice, you will see through these unpleasant phenomena, just as you have seen through every phenomenon that has presented itself so far. You are here because you are a successful yogi, not because you are a failure. Let the momentum of your practice carry you as you continue to sit and walk and apply the vipassana technique."

It is interesting to note that a yogi who is well-versed in jhana (pleasant states made possible by high levels of concentration) may navigate this territory more comfortably than a "dry vipassana" yogi, as concentration is the juice that can lubricate the practice.

The pre-4th *ñana* yogi who repeatedly fails to penetrate the object and proceed to the Arising and Passing Away of Phenomena is what Sayadaw U Pandita calls the "chronic yogi." This yogi can go to retreat after retreat, over a period of years, and never understand what vipassana practice is all about. He will, upon hitting the cushion, quickly enter into a pleasant, hypnogogic state, maybe even discover jhana, but go nowhere with regard to the insight knowledges. U Pandita's frequent exhortations to greater effort and meticulous attention to detail in noting the objects of awareness are aimed at this "chronic yogi."

The “dark night yogi,” on the other hand, is Bill Hamilton’s “chronic achiever.” Having sailed through the all-important fourth ñana and subsequent ñanas five through nine, he hits a wall at the tenth, and can easily spend years there. But even the darkest night ends, and when it does, dawn is sure to follow. The next stop on the Progress of Insight, Knowledge of Equanimity, will make everything that came before it seem worthwhile.

Knowledge of Equanimity (Stage 11)

The narrative of the ñanas continues with the 11th ñana, Knowledge of Equanimity. The equanimity ñana is generally a very happy time for a yogi. Having suffered through the solid physical pain of the third ñana and having endured the dark night of the tenth ñana, the yogi wakes up one day to find that everything is just fine. Dissolution of mind and body continue, but it is no longer a problem. In fact, nothing is a problem.

Compared with most of the other insight knowledge phases, the equanimity ñana is particularly vast and complex, so it’s useful to divide it three sections. We’ll discuss it in terms of low, mid, and high equanimity, each with its characteristic sign posts and challenges.

Low Equanimity

I mentioned earlier that the third and tenth ñanas are the only places where a yogi gets hung up. I should perhaps include the early and middle stages of the eleventh on that list. In early equanimity, a meditator can get stalled-out here for lack of motivation. When everything feels fine, there seems little reason to meditate. Many of us are motivated to practice by our own suffering. And since there is very little suffering in the equanimity phase, it is tempting to stop meditating and enjoy the passing parade. The challenge, then, in early equanimity, is simply to keep meditating, whether you feel like it or not.

A typical pattern that I have seen repeated in dozens of meditators is this: shortly after attaining to the 11th ñana and feeling a great deal of relief from suffering, especially as contrasted with the difficulties of the dark night phase, the yogi becomes complacent and stops practicing regularly. Someone who has maintained a regular practice of an hour or more of formal sitting per days for months suddenly finds himself sitting sporadically, perhaps two or three times a week, and even then for less time than usual. The predictable consequence of this reduction in practice is to fall back into the dukkha ñanas, at which point the yogi, once again motivated by suffering, resumes a rigorous practice schedule, returns to low equanimity, feels relief, stops practicing again, and falls back into the dukkha ñanas. And so on. There is no theoretical limit to how many times this can happen. Sooner or later, the yogi figures it out; the key is to make a firm resolution to keep practicing systematically until stream entry, *no matter what*.

Mid Equanimity

Back on a regular practice schedule, it doesn’t take long for our model meditator to pass from low equanimity to mid equanimity. At this stage, the challenge is slippery mind. By slippery mind, I mean an inability to stay focused on one object, and a tendency to drift into pleasant reverie. At first, this isn’t even noticeable to the meditator as she is having so much fun feeling calm and free. After a while, though, slippery mind becomes maddening; even if the meditator makes a firm resolution to stay with her objects of meditation (in choiceless vipassana, the objects of meditation are the changing phenomena of mind and body as they spontaneously arise), another random thought has slipped in the back door almost before she has finished making the resolution. Slippery mind is a natural consequence of a mind that is unusually quick

and nimble, together with the fact that the equanimity *ñāna* is still part of the dissolution process. In the first stage of dissolution, the fifth *ñāna* (Knowledge of Dissolution), the focus was on the passing away of gross physical sensations, so it was experienced as blissful. In the middle stages of dissolution, the *dukkha ñānas* (numbers 6-10), the mind itself was seen to be dissolving, along with the physical world and even one's own sense of identity. The fear and grief induced by the loss of the apparent self were mind-shattering. Now, in the eleventh *ñāna*, Knowledge of Equanimity, the yogi has entered the final stages of dissolution. Even the fear and grief are seen to disappear as soon as they arise. Things are as they are, and life is good. But the yogi will have to relearn the art of concentration.

One way to understand what is happening here is to hearken back to the phases of chicken herding. **Editor's note: let's relink this to the chicken herding essay on the new site. -KF** In order to master the equanimity *ñāna*, the yogi has to completely develop the fifth and final phase of chicken herding. In this phase, the chicken herder has become one with the flock and is aware of the entire barnyard all at once. This takes a great deal of momentum, and a great deal of practice, because you can't "do" this as much as you can "allow" it; the latter phases of concentration arise naturally when the momentum is strong. And in order to have momentum, you must practice. Frustrated by her slippery mind, however, the yogi may try to hold the objects of meditation too tightly. This will not work with slippery mind. Holding tightly will not allow the later phases of concentration to develop, and will result in yet more frustration.

This is a good place to mention wandering mind and its relationship to concentration. It is the nature of the mind to wander, and even advanced meditators have to deal with this phenomenon. Wandering mind cannot be defeated through brute force, but it can be managed. I once had a beginning meditation student tell me that she had just finished a sitting in which she thought about her kids, her husband, the shopping, her job, and the fact that she was never going to be good at meditation.

"Excellent," I told her. "Just meditate in between all of that."

There is no point in trying to will your mind to silence by brute force, because the effort to do so will make you even more agitated. Instead, cultivate concentration (the ability to sustain attention on an object with minimal distraction) a little bit at a time, in the same way that you would build a muscle by exercising it. As the concentration muscle gets stronger, you'll be able to sustain it for ever longer periods of time. Since the developmental process of awakening is dynamic, it's unavoidable that you will have to relearn concentration skills at various times along the way; every time your perceptual threshold changes, you gain the ability to notice phenomena you couldn't see before. This is a double-edged sword; life is richer and more interesting, but there is also more potential for distraction. This potential for distraction has to be balanced by corresponding increases in your skill at concentration, which set the stage for yet another change in perceptual threshold, and so on. Think of it as an ongoing process rather than a discreet goal with a fixed end point, and be prepared to keep pushing this edge of development throughout your life.

During any meditation sitting, there are moments when the monkey-mind slows down enough that it's possible to stay with an object for a few moments, whether the object is the breath, a *kasina* object, or whatever it may be. Those few moments of concentration condition the mind in such a way that there is a little less time before the next window of calm appears in between the passing storms of monkey-mind. This momentum, or snowball effect, where each little bit of calm conditions the next moment of calm, is an important principle in Buddhist meditation. In traditional teachings, the Buddhists identify "proximate causes" for various mental factors. For example, the proximate cause for *metta* (lovingkindness) is seeing goodness or "loveableness" in another person. The proximate cause for *mudita* (sympathetic joy at the good fortune of

another) is seeing another's success. And the proximate cause for concentration is none other than... concentration! With this in mind, it is easy to see how important the snowball effect is when you are trying to steady the mind. And from this point of view, there is no reason to feel frustrated even when an entire sitting goes by with just a few brief windows of calm. Every moment of concentration makes it more likely that the next moment of concentration will arise. Always keep in mind that it's all right that you haven't mastered this yet; you can learn, you can get better. It's a process. Awakening itself is the developmental process of learning to see experience as process. And awakening, by this definition, is the crown jewel in the collection of skills, understandings, and developments that, taken together, are contemplative fitness. Wandering mind, then, becomes ever more manageable with practice, and this is good because the later phases of concentration (chicken herding 4 and 5) will not arise if the mind is not still. This does not mean that thinking stops during deep concentration, but rather that it fades into the background, slows down, and does not pull the mind away from its intended target, i.e., the object or objects of meditation. When you are firmly abiding in a jhana and thinking arises, it is felt as subtle physical pain as it begins to pull you out of your pleasant state. With practice, this pain becomes a familiar signal that it's time to turn the mind away from thoughts and toward the object of meditation... or face the consequences. The consequences are simply that you unceremoniously exit the jhana. The skill to exit a jhana according to the schedule you decided upon before entering the jhana as opposed to staying too long or being dumped out prematurely is, as we discussed earlier, the fourth parameter for mastery of a jhana.

So, how does the yogi get to equanimity in the first place? Why do some people get hung up for years in the preceding ñana? The key to coming to terms with the tenth ñana, Knowledge of Re-observation, is surrender. Once the yogi surrenders to whatever her practice brings, she is free. Having surrendered, it does not matter whether the present experience goes or stays, or whether it is pleasant or unpleasant. It this attitude of surrender, along with time on the cushion, that results in the full development of the strata of mind where fear, misery, and disgust live. Once those mental strata are developed, or (viewed through another lens) once the *kundalini* energy is able to move freely through those chakras, it is as if a groove has been worn through that territory. You now own that territory and although you move up and down through those same mental strata every day and in each meditation session, they no longer create problems in your meditation.

When it becomes obvious that slippery mind is the only thing standing between you and further progress, there is a specific remedy that you can apply. The trick is to target thoughts directly. Here are some effective ways to do this:

1. Turn toward your thoughts as though addressing another person, and say, "Speak! I am listening." Try it now.

Notice how thought suddenly has nothing to say! The mind becomes silent as a church. Do this as many times as you need to until the mind becomes still.

2. Repeat to yourself silently or aloud, "I wonder what my next thought will be."⁴ Watch your mind the way a cat would watch a mousehole, alert to the exact moment the mouse (a thought) peeks its head out of the hole. By directly and continuously objectifying thought in this way, thoughts will subside, leaving blissful silence in the mind.

3. Note (label) your thoughts carefully. Put each thought into a category. Planning thought, scheming thought, doubting thought, self-congratulatory thought, imaging thought, evaluation thought, self-loathing thought, reflection thought. By objectifying your thoughts directly, you turn them into allies; the thoughts themselves become the object of your meditation rather than a problem.

4. Count your thoughts. By counting them, you have again made thoughts the object of your meditation. Thoughts are only a problem when they are flying under the radar. Light them up with attention and they cease to cause trouble.

5. Do a binary note (a noting practice that has just two choices) of “thinking/not thinking” or “noisy/quiet.”

Always think in terms of co-opting your enemies. Anything that seems to be a hindrance in your practice should immediately be taken as the object of your meditation. In this way, you turn the former hindrance into an ally in your process of awakening.

High Equanimity

Once thoughts have been clearly objectified and are no longer flying under the radar, high equanimity naturally emerges. At this stage, sitting is effortless. The yogi can sit happily for hours at a time. If pain comes, no problem. Wandering mind, no problem. Objects present themselves to the mind one after another, obediently posing for inspection. This is where the yogi really gets a feel for what vipassana is all about, as she effortlessly deconstructs each thought and sensation that appears. In high equanimity, the mind is unwilling to reach out to any object. It doesn't move toward pleasant objects or away from unpleasant objects. This is what makes it possible to sit for long periods of time; when pleasant is not favored over unpleasant, there is no particular reason to get up.

The mind state of equanimity is inherently appealing. On a hierarchy of desirable states, joy is higher than exhilaration, bliss is higher than joy, and equanimity is higher than bliss. Viewed through this understanding, it's easy to see the natural logic in how the Progress of Insight unfolds; notwithstanding the occasional rough patches in the 3rd *ñāna* and the *dukkha ñānas*, the progression has moved from the quiet exhilaration of the 1st *ñāna* through the joy of the 4th, the bliss of the 5th, and has finally stabilized in the equanimity of the 11th.

From my point of view as a teacher and coach, it's interesting to track the hours of formal sitting as a yogi develops through the three phases of equanimity. When she gets to high equanimity, the hours will usually spike up. A meditator who has been struggling to find time in her busy life for two hours of daily meditation may suddenly find herself sitting three, four, or even five hours a day. Who knows where all these extra hours come from? People will give up television, reading, time with friends. They'll sleep less and take less time eating than usual or leave aside habitual tasks that don't really need to be done. When I ask why they are sitting so much now, students reply that there isn't anything else they'd rather do. They just feel like meditating. This spike in practice hours is phase-specific and usually only lasts a few days or weeks. It ends when the yogi reaches stream entry (or the *path* moment of whichever cycle they happen to be working through at the moment), at which time their practice hours fall back to a more sustainable pace. Whenever I see a yogi's practice hours spike in this way, I feel confident that they are about to complete a *path* and I tell them so. This particular trick of prognostication has proven remarkably accurate and I marvel every time this process unfolds as predicted by a 2,000 year-old map of human development.

Path and Fruition

Let's briefly review what we've seen so far:

Theravada Buddhism identifies Four Paths of enlightenment. The first of these Four Paths can be subdivided into 16 “insight knowledges” or *ñānas*. These *ñānas* arise one after the other, in invariable order, as a result of vipassana meditation (objectifying, investigating, and deconstructing the changing phenomena of mind and body). Most of the heavy lifting is done in

the first three ñanas; taken together, the first three insight knowledges can be thought of as the pre-vipassana phase. During this first phase of practice, it's as though the yogi is rubbing two sticks together in an effort to start a fire.⁵ When the fire takes hold in earnest, the 4th ñana, the all-important Arising and Passing of Phenomena (A&P) has been attained. From this point on, the practice is more about constancy than heroics. Patience and trust are important; at times it is necessary to avoid the temptation to push too hard, understanding that just as you can't force a young plant to grow by pulling on its stalk, you can't force yourself to develop through the ñanas.

My hypothesis is that this process of development is hardwired into the human organism. Everyone has the potential to develop along this particular axis, and in order to do so one must simply follow the instructions for accessing and deconstructing each new layer of mind as it arises.

Stages 12-16

We now continue to track the progress of our idealized yogi. It's tempting to make a big deal out of the Path moment (the moment in which stream entry is attained). So much emphasis is put on attaining stream entry that we imagine there is some secret to it; surely there is some special bit of knowledge or some extra bit of effort required to "get us over this last hump." In fact, it's not like that at all. Just as all the previous insight knowledges arose, in order, on cue, the Path moment shows up out of nowhere when you least expect it. It's a little bit like chewing and swallowing; when you put food into your mouth, you begin to chew. At some point, when sufficient chewing has taken place, you swallow. It's an involuntary reflex. You don't have to obsess about whether swallowing will occur or try to control the process. If you do, chances are you will just get in the way. Similarly, when you meditate according to the instructions, the various strata of mind are automatically accessed, the apparently solid phenomena are automatically deconstructed, the information is naturally processed, and you automatically move from one insight knowledge to the next without having to orchestrate the process at all.

In just this way, our yogi is sitting there one day (or walking, or standing), and there is a momentary discontinuity in her stream of consciousness. It's not a big deal. But, immediately afterward, she asks herself, "Was that it?" It seems that something has changed, but it's very subtle. She feels lighter than before. Maybe she begins to laugh. "Was that it? Ha! I thought it was going to be a big deal. That was hardly anything. And yet..."

Something is somehow different. It would be very difficult to say exactly what. In many ways, things feel exactly the same.

In Mahasi Sayadaw's classic *The Progress of Insight*, he explains that insight knowledges 12-16 happen all together, in a single instant. Stages 12-15 are one-time events signaling stream entry, while stage 16, fruition, can be re-experienced later as many times as desired. Mahasi's descriptions, based on the 5th Century Buddhist commentary the *Vissudhimagga* (Path of Purification), itself based on an even earlier text, the *Vimuddhimagga*, are interesting and well worth the read.⁶ From the point of view of the yogi, however, it's much simpler; she develops through the first eleven insight knowledges and then something changes in her practice, completing the Progress of Insight. From a simple, subjective point of view, then, there are just twelve stages: the first eleven, including equanimity, and the Path and Fruition event, which somehow resets the clock and completes the cycle. Fruition is technically the 16th insight knowledge, and we'll preserve that numbering system, although I will gloss over insight knowledges 12-15, understanding them as theoretical structures intended to explain changes the yogi will notice after the fact as opposed to discreet stages the yogi experiences in real time.

as they occur. In fact, the yogi, by definition, experiences nothing whatsoever during the momentary blip that is the Path and Fruition moment.

Later, as the days and weeks go by, it becomes more and more clear that the event was indeed First Path (stream entry). First of all, the practice is different now. Instead of having to sit for 10 or 15 minutes in order to work herself up to the 4th ñāna, every sitting *begins* with the 4th ñāna or A&P. From there, it takes only a short time, sometimes a few minutes, sometimes just seconds, to get to equanimity.

Second, our yogi may suddenly find that she has access to four or more clearly delineated jhanas, or “realms of absorption.” She may find that she can navigate these states simply by inclining her mind toward them, jumping between them and manipulating them at the speed of thought.

Third, there is the possibility of re-experiencing the 16th ñāna, Knowledge of Fruition; a yogi can learn to call up fruition, which, in classical terms, is said to be the direct apprehension of nibbana (nirvana), at will. There are said to be three doors to nibbana, namely the dukkha (suffering), anicca (impermanence), and anatta (no-self) doors. Each of these modes of accessing cessation leads to a slightly different experience of entering and exiting nibbana. The fascinating exploration known as fruition practice is only available to post-stream entry yogis and consists of systematically calling up, becoming familiar with, and comparing these phenomena.

And finally, there is the 17th ñāna, “knowledge of review.” It is possible to learn to call up each of the ñānas 1-11 in addition to the 16th ñāna of fruition and re-experience them as a kind of laboratory for understanding what the insight knowledges feel like and what insights they bring. (Ñānas 12-15 are one-time events marking the attainment of Path and as such cannot be reviewed.) The ability to review previously attained ñānas is especially helpful for those who plan to become meditation teachers, but is interesting and useful for everyone because the ñānas will continue to cycle throughout a yogi’s lifetime and it’s very empowering to be able to identify them as they arise. This ability to see sensations, thoughts, and mind states as process rather than identifying with them is part of the larger process of awakening. When we objectify (take as the object of attention) something that was previously seen as self, we move to more and more subtle forms of identification and ultimately come to the place where everything in experience can be seen as process, impersonal and ever-changing.

Knowledge of Review

Question: Kenneth, I'm curious about the phenomenon called “cycling” and how that manifests. I relate well to the part of your commentary that explains the initial run-up to stream entry. I relate well to your explanation of a yogi's practice and how it changes after achieving stream entry. In MCTB² Daniel Ingram makes reference to the part concentration plays in recognizing progress and he explains that a person with less concentration (attention?) will be less clued in to where they are and what's going on. Your description below hints at the same kind of thing:

*“Third, there is the ****possibility**** of re-experiencing the 16th ñāna, fruition; a yogi can ****learn**** to call up fruition, which is said to be the direct apprehension of nibbana (nirvana) at will. There are three doors to nibbana, namely the dukkha (suffering), anicca (impermanence), and anatta (no-self) doors. Each of these modes of accessing cessation leads to a slightly different experience of entering and exiting nibbana. The fascinating exploration known as fruition practice is only available to post-stream entry yogis and consists of systematically calling up, becoming familiar with, and comparing these phenomena.”*

*(I added the **'s to highlight the parts of your comments I was referring to in the above.)*
Can you elaborate on the role concentration plays at this stage? I have not been paying very close attention to where I am according to the four path model (or any model) and I think I'm missing some important information due to my self-induced ignorance. I experience fruition, but it occurs infrequently and on the cushion. Is it possible to miss the experience of fruition if it happens during a meeting, walking along, driving, what have you? Will increasing my concentration help me recognize it?

Answer: A high level of concentration is required in order to complete the 16 ñanas and attain stream entry, but I wouldn't say that concentration is the deciding factor in whether a yogi recognizes and can effectively review the territory; it would seem that attitude and training are more important. Here is an example that might help to make the point:

A Zen student attains stream entry. This happens in spite of the fact that neither ñanas nor Paths are mentioned in Zen training and is not surprising given that the ñana/Path model is just one way to describe and map a natural, organic process of human development. Having traversed the territory, though, the Zen student has no meta-perspective that will allow him to conceive of what he has been through. In fact, throughout the Zen training, the various phenomena that arise during meditation are actively invalidated by the teacher; all of the pleasant and unpleasant experiences are considered "makyo" (hallucination). A good Zen student learns very quickly not to attempt to make sense of meditative phenomena for fear of incurring the ire of the teacher. In this case, both attitude (the belief that thinking about or assigning importance to meditative experiences is dangerous) and a lack of training in identifying and systematically accessing various states conspire to prevent the Zen yogi from mastering this aspect of practice even though he has shown that he has sufficient concentration to access them.

In cases like this, a bit of remediation is in order for those who would like to understand and master the mental territory that has become available with the advent of stream entry. This is similar to the situation you now find yourself in, so I'll bring this back to specifics and offer a prescription that is tailored to you.

You have already taken several important steps toward understanding your experience; you have begun to educate yourself about the phenomena by reading about the maps, you have identified fruition as a recurring phenomenon in your own experience, and you have made a commitment to learn more. The next step is to notice patterns in how your experience manifests both during a sitting and over a period of hours and days. Notice, for example, that a sitting will often follow a predictable pattern; beginning with very little concentration, you become more and more concentrated until you reach a climax of concentration, sometimes culminating in a fruition or series of fruitions, after which you become less concentrated again and have to work your way up to a concentrated state again.

Using more technical language, a stream-enterer's sitting begins with the 4th ñana, progresses through ñanas 5-11, then leaps to the 16th ñana, fruition, often a momentary event and experienced as a blip-out or discontinuity of conscious awareness. After that, it resets to the 4th ñana and repeats the pattern. You can enhance your ability to notice the various states as they arise by keeping a journal of each sitting. Over time you see a pattern. For example, here's a typical sequence of events that might unfold during a single sitting for a meditator in the review phase after stream entry:

-I started the sitting with my mind a jumble (the mind is not yet settled enough to access any Insight Knowledge).

-Almost immediately, my mind settled down and I felt pleasant tingling and vibrating in my leg, along with a feeling of well-being and lightness (4th ñana, Arising and Passing of Phenomena).

-Next, there were subtle, cool tingles all over my skin and I felt bliss (5th ñāna, Dissolution).

-Next, I heard a sudden noise and was startled, frightened, and disoriented (6th ñāna, Fear).

-Next, my jaw and neck started to tighten and writhe, and I felt itches on my skin (7th ñāna, Misery).

-Next, I began thinking about snails and worms and ugly people, and my face pulled involuntarily into a sneer (8th ñāna, Disgust).

-Next, my chest became tight, my breathing shallow, and I started thinking “Let me out of here!” (9th ñāna, Desire for Deliverance).

-Next, my mind was full of all kinds of negativity, my concentration went to hell, and I began thinking I was wasting my time and I might as well get up and have another cup of coffee or watch some television. I started thinking about the argument I once had with someone, and how I had definitely been in the right (10th ñāna, Knowledge of Re-observation).

Finally, my mind settled down once again, the field of attention expanded to include the entire environment around me, and sitting was effortless. There was a pain in my leg, but it was no problem; I experienced it as a flow of sensations, some pleasant, some unpleasant, but none of it was a problem (11th ñāna, Knowledge of Equanimity).

I became even calmer. Then, when I wasn’t expecting anything, there was a momentary discontinuity in my awareness, followed by a deep breath and a feeling of bliss (16th ñāna, Knowledge of Fruition).

After that, I sat up straight, feeling energy returning to my body and mind and realized I was back at the beginning of the cycle (4th ñāna, Knowledge of The Arising and Passing Away of Phenomena).

Sometimes these stages go by very quickly. You may get just a momentary taste of each ñāna as you quickly move through it to the next. Nonetheless, with repeated observations, you can see that the mind is moving through a series of layers or strata as it becomes more concentrated throughout the sitting. Also remember that “concentrated” does not mean “focused on one small area or object.” Rather, it means “remaining undistracted with the mind resting in the object or objects of meditation.” In fact, as concentration deepens throughout the sitting, the movement is toward an ever-more-diffuse field of awareness.

Once you have a feeling for what each state or stage entails, you can make a resolution (Pali: *adhitthana*) to call up each state and review it in isolation. You can call up any state in any order in this way. This becomes your laboratory for really understanding and identifying each of the ñānas. The formal resolution does not have to be elaborate; it can be as simple as “May I review the 4th ñāna now,” or “OK, I wanna do some fruitions.” The more you work with resolutions, the more confidence you have in them, until it becomes clear to you that all these states are available to you instantaneously by simply deciding to go there. Finally, the answer to the question “how do you get to such-and-such a ñāna or such-and-such a jhana”? becomes as simple as the question “how do you get to the kitchen from the living room”? You just go there. You don’t even think about it. That level of proficiency with jhanas and ñānas is a realistic goal for anyone who has the interest and the willingness to train systematically toward it. Taken together, this kind of training is called *adhitthana* practice, and is usually undertaken during the 17th ñāna (Knowledge of Review), review phase but can be done any time after First (or any other) Path.

The first time through the complete cycle usually takes months, sometimes years, and, by definition, results in the first path of enlightenment, using traditional Theravada Buddhist language. The first path attainment is also referred to as stream entry, which is what we will call it in this book. Having made it all the way through the cycle once, you now “own” it, and can learn to review all of the territory you have covered. Even without further practice, you will

naturally cycle through this territory. At some point, though, the mind seems to get tired of this first package and moves on. You find yourself at the beginning of a new progress of insight, another run through the cycle you had completed to attain stream entry.

The cycles continue to occur whether or not the meditator pays attention to them. They become a natural part of life, like the breath, or the sleep cycle, or the seasons and the year. Just as one doesn't get tired of breathing or sleeping, but surrenders to the natural rhythms of life, someone who has continued to practice beyond stream entry has integrated the cycles into his or her daily rhythms. And although we may get tired of the seasons, as we do when it is very hot in the summer or very cold in the winter, we are deeply confident that they will soon change.

Notes:

1. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/mahasi/progress.html> ↵
2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vipassan%C4%81> ↵
3. *Ñāna* (pronounced “nyana”) is a word from the Pali language of ancient India, translated here as (insight knowledge). ↵
4. This highly effective practice comes from Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*. ↵
5. Thanks to Shinzen Young for this image of rubbing two sticks together to start a fire, thereby releasing the potential energy contained in the wooden sticks. ↵
6. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/mahasi/progress.html#ch7.17> ↵
7. <http://www.amazon.com/Mastering-Core-Teachings-Buddha-Unusually/dp/1904658407> ↵

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The map is not the territory

“The map is not the territory.” -Alfred Korzybski

It would be tempting to imagine that one could walk through the insight stages exactly as they are described on the Progress of Insight map, with each phenomenon showing up exactly on cue. It is reassuring to see yourself as the perfect example of meditative development. As with any map of human development, however, there are infinite individual variations. It is one thing to accept that there is an overall sweep of progress that moves through predictable stages, each building upon the other, and it is another thing entirely to expect to see each developmental landmark the same way someone else saw it.

We must also remember that the Theravada Progress of Insight map and the Theravada practice approach and techniques reinforce one another; if you are practicing vipassana, you are training yourself to meticulously observe your own moment by moment experience. In traditions that emphasize the Progress of Insight map, you may also be trained to observe patterns over time. In such a program, you are likely to see things in a

developmental sequence and you are likely to have the perceptual and conceptual tools to map your own experience and to be able to compare it to a standard map of development. In other systems, this may not be the case. In some Zen systems, for example, meditators are taught to see all temporal phenomena as illusion.¹ They may be encouraged to ignore any thoughts they may have about the order in which experiences unfold. This would be a profoundly anti-mapping approach. The emphasis in such a case is on the momentary experience, to the exclusion of all else. A meditator might become very advanced in such a system and yet have no ability to track his or her progress through time.

Although maps are not necessary to progress, they are extremely useful for many people. This speaks to the fundamental assumption of pragmatic dharma: do what works. Maps work. We understand from modern methods of education that if you can clearly articulate a goal, subdivide that goal into smaller, attainable sub-goals, and provide clear feedback all along the way, the student has a high probability of success. Using the Progress of Insight map is consistent with what we now know about how people learn. Zen, on the other hand, is not. It should be no surprise, then that it is a truism in Zen that only one student in a hundred succeeds. This is a romantic notion that may appeal to a certain macho sense of specialness, but it is terrible pedagogy. So, we use the maps, understanding their limitations, because to date we have nothing else that approaches the success rate of pragmatic dharma.

Here's what every student can reasonably expect:

In the beginning stages of a meditation practice, it is often possible to calm the mind after a few minutes of noting or following the breath. At this stage, students expect that the more they meditate, the calmer they will become, and that this will continue forever. But it doesn't happen that way. Instead, after an initial period of success, meditation gets harder; meditators encounter rough patches and become discouraged. This happens to almost everyone, although details vary. For some, the distraction is caused by itching; for others, back pain; for still others, it is wandering mind. But the pattern of starting out optimistic and later getting discouraged almost always holds.

For those who continue with good technique and good coaching, there is a noticeable shift from this first difficult stage, in which meditation becomes effortless again. For some people, this will be a spectacular event, with lights, unitive experiences, and life-changing shifts in perspective... for others, it will be much less dramatic; they'll simply that they are enjoying their meditation again. This is a good example of how the overall map holds while individual expression of the developmental phases varies.

After some days or weeks in this new, easy and pleasant phase, meditation gets hard yet again. Then it gets easy again. And so on. Experienced teachers look for these changes, and are ready to give encouragement or suggest tweaks in technique or attitude to counter predictable challenges. One criticism of maps in general is that students will learn the maps and imagine themselves into the various states in order to convince themselves or the teacher that they are making progress. This is a legitimate concern, but it isn't a big deal. In the first place, it is hard to fool an experienced teacher. For another thing, who cares if the student is mistaken about his progress? These things tend to work themselves out over time. When life kicks your ass again, it's back to the cushion.

A metaphor is useful here; we see that a human being follows a typical developmental arc, from infant to toddler, to pre-adolescent, adolescent, young adult, mature adult, to old age, and finally death. This general sequence is a reliable predictor of the arc of a

human life, albeit with infinite variations in the way an individual will experience these changes. With this in mind, it need not be so surprising that we develop through meditative insight in a more or less predictable sequence; humans have a lot in common with each other, and often develop along predictable lines.

Finally, understand that you will spend a lifetime learning at ever deeper levels that the map is not the territory. A map is a concept, an embarrassingly incomplete summary made possible by the extraordinary human powers of pattern recognition. The map will help you orient yourself, normalize your experience, and find motivation to practice. But your experience will be uniquely your own, rich and complex beyond imagining, and ultimately impervious to even the most sophisticated efforts at cartography. One of the last things Bill Hamilton said to me while on his death bed in a Seattle hospital in 1999 was, "All maps eventually fail."

Use the maps wisely, accept that they will fail, and understand that your own experience supersedes any concept. The map is not the territory.

"When the bird and the book disagree, always believe the bird." -John James Audubon

Notes:

1. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Makyo> ↵

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Concentration, Mindfulness, and Investigation

Concentration, as we are using the word here, is the ability to sustain the mind on an object with minimal distraction. Concentration is the opposite of mind-wandering. The focus of the mind during concentration can be narrow and laser-like, zooming in, for example, on a single point of body sensation, or it can be wide and diffuse, where the entire environment is the object of attention. So it is important to understand that *non-distractedness* is the key to concentration. In Buddhist theory, concentration (*samadhi*) is one of the seven factors of enlightenment, the seven mental factors that are said to come into balance during a moment of awakening. Concentration, then, is essential to contemplative fitness, both for the attainment of altered states and for the ability to see experience as process, aka awakening or enlightenment.

To get a picture of what concentration looks like, think of a cat sitting on the front lawn, watching a gopher hole. The cat is completely focused on the task; it may sit alertly for ten or twenty minutes, patiently staring at the hole in the ground, waiting for the gopher to pop its head out. This is concentration. From this image, we can also see why

concentration alone is not enough to gain enlightenment; cats are not enlightened, notwithstanding their prodigious concentration skills. So concentration is but one of the skills required. This point comes further into focus if we compare and contrast concentration and mindfulness (*sati*). I like to define *mindfulness* as noticing that you are noticing. While a cat has wonderful concentration, it is hard to imagine that there is much self-awareness there. The cat does not notice that it is noticing, and hence will never become enlightened; among the inhabitants of this planet, the ability to balance mindfulness and concentration is probably unique to humans.

It is a truism in Buddhist theory that concentration alone will never lead to awakening. In the Mahasi tradition, monks can wax positively derisive about people who sit around for hours in highly concentrated states but never investigate the objects of attention. These theoretical concentration junkies are objects of mild pity. So, we must be careful not to fall into the concentration trap. But let's not let this pendulum swing too far!

Concentration is, after all, one of the seven factors of enlightenment, and without it a meditator cannot stay with any one object long enough to investigate and deconstruct the object. Furthermore, "dry" vipassana practice (investigation without concentration) can be painful at times. Concentration is the juice that lubricates your practice, keeps you interested, brings pleasant experiences, and therefore motivation to practice. For all these reasons, it is well worthwhile to become adept at concentration. The section on pure concentration will introduce targeted practices to develop concentration in isolation, understanding that eventually your facility with concentration will be integrated into all the other practices you do, forming a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. For now, though, let's continue to contrast concentration with other important mental factors.

Imagine that I hand you a package. It's a box, all wrapped in colored paper and bows. A pure concentration approach would be to put your hand on the package and leave it there, maintaining just enough contact with the tactile sensation or visual appearance of the package to focus your mind on it to the exclusion of everything else. Whenever your attention wanders away from the package, bring it back. You want to become so focused on the package that you merge with it. You don't know what's in the package; you don't care. A vipassana approach, on the other hand, would be to take the package from my hand, shake it, prod, poke and palpate it, give it a thorough visual examination from all angles and distances, and finally to begin tearing off the paper and the box, layer by layer, to discover what is inside. Vipassana requires that you balance concentration with mindfulness and investigation. Remember that mindfulness is noticing that you are noticing. Investigation is just as it sounds; what is this thing? I must investigate to find out.

Vipassana leads to the deconstruction of initially solid-seeming objects into their component parts. With pure concentration, the object becomes more solid as you apply the technique, whereas with vipassana, the object becomes less solid, and more fluid. When awakening is the goal, the ideal is a dynamic balance of concentration, mindfulness, and investigation. This balance allows you to maintain focus on the objects of attention with minimal distraction while also deconstructing the object.

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Quick Start Guide

What would I say if I had just five minutes to give comprehensive instructions for awakening?

You are unenlightened to the extent that you are embedded in your experience. You think that your experience is you. You must dis-embed. Do this by taking each aspect of experience as object (looking at it and recognizing it) in a systematic way. Then, surrender entirely.

Do these practices, exactly as written:

First Gear:

- 1) Objectify body sensations. If you can name them, you aren't embedded there. Notice sensations and note to yourself: "Pressure, tightness, tension, release, coolness, warmth, softness, hardness, tingling, itching, burning, stinging, pulsing, throbbing, seeing, tasting, smelling, hearing." If I am looking at something it is not "I".
- 2) Objectify feeling-tone. Are sensations pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? Every time you note pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, you are dis-embedding from experience.
- 3) Objectify mind states. Call them out as they occur. "Investigation, curiosity, happiness, anxiety, amusement, sadness, joy, anger, frustration, annoyance, irritation, aversion, desire, disgust, fear, worry, calm, embarrassment, shame, self-pity, compassion, love, contentment, dullness, sleepiness, bliss, exhilaration, triumph, self-loathing." Name them and be free. These mind states are not "you;" if there is a "you" it must be the one who is looking, rather than what is being looked at. Below, we will challenge the notion that there is any "you" at all.

4) Objectify thoughts. Categorize them: planning thought, anticipating thought, worrying thought, imaging thought, remembering thought, rehearsing thought, scenario spinning thought, fantasy thought, self-recrimination thought. Come up with your own vocabulary and see your thoughts as though they belonged to someone else. The content of your thoughts is not relevant except to the extent that it helps you to label and therefore objectify them.

Second Gear:

5) Objectify the apparent subject. Who am “I”? Turn the light of attention back on itself. Who knows about this experience? To whom is this happening? Spoiler: you will not find a self to whom this is happening. Keep looking until this becomes second nature.

Third Gear:

6) Surrender entirely. Let it be. Good. Now go beyond even surrender, to the simple acknowledgement that this moment is as it is, with or without your approval. This does not mean that you must be passive. Surrender also to activity. You are not in charge. You are the little kid in the back seat with the plastic steering wheel. Relax and enjoy the ride.

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Introduction to the Method

The method described here is a synthesis of the lessons of my practice and teaching over the past thirty years. My aim is to present a systematic, reproducible method for the development of contemplative fitness. The method works; hundreds of students have used this program to develop high levels of contemplative fitness. But it is not the only effective method, nor is it necessarily the best for every individual. Think of it as similar to a gym routine from a personal fitness trainer; you can expect it to perform as advertised if you do the work, but it is not the only way to work out.

While we are developing contemplative excellence, let us also develop a bit of emotional maturity; I would like to take the moralism out of meditation. You would never think that your personal fitness trainer is a better person than you are simply because he can bench press heavier weights than you; he just works out more and consequently has a skill set and a fitness level that you do not yet have. This does not make him a saint.

Contemplative development is morally neutral in the same way; being an expert meditator or being “awakened” does not make you a better person. Rather, a high level of contemplative fitness means that you have pumped enough mental iron to develop a set of skills and competencies that most people do not have. If you want to be a good person, you must behave like one; simply meditating won’t do it for you.

There are many possible variations on contemplative fitness. This method is one that matches my values and has consistently proven successful in helping my students

develop elite contemplative skills. It trains a variety of skills and understandings that are valuable on their own, and can serve as a starting point for further exploration and specialization depending on individual interests. The course draws on techniques and concepts I have found useful from Theravada Buddhism as well as various traditions including Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, Neo-Advaita and Christian mysticism. You will also find a healthy dose of my unique contributions; when possible, I will make an effort to point out which is which in order to avoid confusion.

Depending on his or her interests, the student may or may not decide to follow the method all the way through. I recommend stream entry, as described in the chapter by that name, as a wonderful goal for any meditator. For a more casual meditator, simply reading the following chapter on the three speed transmission and the techniques compendium in the appendix may be enough. For the student interested in mapping the experiences of the contemplative path and gaining facility with altered states, the later chapters of the method will be of interest. For someone who seeks elite levels of contemplative fitness, aka spiritual enlightenment, I recommend that you practice the program in its entirety. The surest way to arrive at contemplative excellence is to build a robust practice by triangulating from many different directions.

This is a course for a lifetime of contemplative development. When someone asks me how long it takes to reach stream entry or some other mile-marker of progress, I point out that a similarly unanswerable question would be “how long does it take to be able to do twenty pushups?” For some people, it is trivial; they can already do twenty pushups. For others, doing twenty pushups is a big deal, and some people may never be able to do it in their lifetime. Similarly, with contemplative fitness there is a great deal of individual variation in the time it takes to make progress, depending on what you’re bringing to the table and how much time and energy you are willing to invest. Based on my experience working with students, we can model a bell curve for how long it takes to get stream entry, the first goal I recommend to my students and to the readers of this book. Most people who take on the project are likely to get stream entry within a year or two. On the tail ends of the curve, I know people who have been working seriously towards stream entry for several years and haven’t yet gotten it, and I also know people who managed it within a month or two of getting serious about their meditation practice. Having attained stream entry, you are likely to find that there is more to do and that you are more interested in your meditation practice than ever. Ultimately, there is no end to contemplative development. Like evolution, it adapts forever, always changing and moving into new spaces, never resting or growing stale. Plan on practicing for the rest of your life and falling more deeply in love with your practice with each passing year.

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[Course Objectives →](#)

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Course Objectives

After completing this course, you will know:

- The difference between pure concentration and vipassana meditation.
- Basic theory of the Three Speed Transmission
- Three basic skills of 1) concentration, 2) perceptual acuity, and 3) perceptual resolution.
- Basic developmental theory of contemplative fitness.
- Basic theory of 20 strata of mind.
- Multiple meditation techniques useful in formal meditation and in daily life, including vipassana, concentration (*samatha*), self-inquiry, and choiceless awareness.

After completing this course, you will be able to:

- Deconstruct the objects of attention using the vipassana technique.
- Recognize, navigate, and objectify a variety of mind states.
- Access 20 strata of mind, including the Insight Knowledges from the Progress of Insight and thirteen jhanas (altered states of consciousness brought about by meditative absorption).
- Practice meditation interactively with other people.
- See your experience as process, at least some of the time.

Trajectory of the course

- Balance concentration and investigation to progress through the Progress of Insight and attain stream entry.
 - You've learned to navigate and objectify a wide variety of mind states and experiences, in formal practice and in daily life.
- Use concentration to develop facility with jhanas.
 - You've learned to access a variety of blissful absorption states that are fun, interesting, and conducive to tranquility.
- Use 6th jhana to scaffold 2nd gear (self-enquiry) and dwell as the Witness.
 - You've become less distractible by learning to sustain attention on one object instead of many.
 - You've learned another way of moving practice into daily life.
 - You've learned another valuable perspective: to look at your own experience from a dispassionate point of view.
- See through the Witness by investigating it or letting it run its course to scaffold 3rd gear
 - You've learned to see your life as process.
 - You've leveled the playing field and learned that there is no ultimate state; there are many lenses or perspectives of equal status.

Three Basic Skills

1. Concentration.
2. Increased perceptual resolution.
3. Increased perceptual acuity.

To understand the difference between perceptual acuity and perceptual resolution, imagine watching a movie. Higher acuity relates to clarity and sharpness. With high acuity, can see the images more clearly, see the colors as rich and saturated, and see what the figures in the movie are doing in great detail.

Perceptual resolution allows you to drill down to see pixels rather than a solid shape (this is spatial resolution), and also allows you to see that, in reality, a movie is a series of still frames projected in quick succession, creating the illusion of movement (temporal resolution).

Much of the training we will do is designed to strengthen the three basic skills of concentration, perceptual acuity, and perceptual resolution. These three skills build the foundation for the entire program. More complex skills arise naturally when these simple building blocks are well developed.

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Introduction to Stream Entry

We begin our training by working towards stream entry, a classical attainment from Buddhism. There are many ways of interpreting stream entry, and some traditions don't discuss it at all. My interpretation is rooted in the tradition of the late Mahasi Sayadaw, a Burmese meditation teacher known for bringing meditation beyond the walls of the monastery to make it available to the common people. In his book, *The Progress of Insight*, Mahasi outlines stages that a meditator typically experiences while practicing a specific kind of meditation.¹ In this chapter, I will present my interpretation of this map, modified to remove unnecessary jargon and to describe the way these stages might be experienced today.

Theravada Buddhism, the Buddhism of Southeast Asia, identifies four “paths” or levels of enlightenment. These are seen as sequential attainments, with each path building upon the previous. The first of the four paths is called stream entry. Of the four stages, stream entry or first path is the easiest to describe, especially if you use the map from the Burmese tradition of Mahasi Sayadaw. Within this system, first path is itself subdivided into sixteen stages. Remarkably, people today continue to experience this predictable sequence of events and it is possible to track a meditator’s progress as he moves through this process; this allows a teacher to give encouragement and targeted guidance all along the way.

The general arc of development goes like this: Meditation is easy, then it gets hard, then it really catches fire, then it all goes to hell, and then it stabilizes for a while. It is from this platform of stability that stream entry (first of the four paths of enlightenment) is reached. Even a meditator who knows nothing about the maps is likely to go through these stages. I have spoken with people who found these maps later in their practice and looking back were able to recognize having been through the stages described. Because the development through these stages is not one of linear increases in happiness, knowing about the maps can help manage the difficult parts of the process. Since anyone who practices meditation seriously is likely to go through these stages, it’s helpful to know about them.

The stages encompass the whole spectrum of experience, from the physical discomfort of sitting down to meditate for the first time, to ecstatic joy, bliss, fear and misery, and finally, equanimity. Having been through this roller coaster of highs and lows, a meditator gains a new level of confidence.

This newfound confidence is one of the benefits of stream entry. Sayadaw U Pandita once expressed it like this: “When you get to stream entry, you will be like a *bobo doll*. There is a kind of inflatable doll that is round on the bottom and weighted with sand so that you can punch it and knock it over, but it will always pop back up. I do not know what you call it in your country, but in my country we call it a *bobo doll*.”²

The most efficient way to attain stream entry is by systematically investigating the experience of this moment. The most foolproof way to systematically investigate the experience of this moment is vipassana meditation via the noting technique. Noting is foolproof because it provides a real-time feedback loop to keep you on track; you know you are doing it right because the noting (labeling, either silently or aloud) is not possible unless you are investigating your experience.

In the four paths model, stream entry is the first stage (path) of enlightenment and is referred to as “classical enlightenment” by some teachers, but people often overestimate its effects. Bill Hamilton used to say that “after all, there are four paths, so how good could the first one be? Stream entry is only a quarter of the way there.” Attaining stream entry will not solve all of your problems, but by the time you have it, you will have gained mastery of a variety of skills and techniques that lead to more freedom over time, including the ability to objectify and dis-embed from all kinds of phenomena. Most meditation systems do not talk about measurable, achievable goals of any kind, but I strongly encourage all of my students to work towards stream entry. Having a systematic plan of attack is highly motivating and is conducive to making progress when learning any skill, including meditation.

Notes:

1. Mahasi was expanding on the Visudimagga, a 5th century commentary by Buddhaghosa. The Visudimagga, in turn, was likely influenced by the Vimuttimagga, an earlier text by Upatissa. ↵
2. The bobo doll analogy came while U Pandita was speaking to a group of foreign (non-Burmese) yogis on long term silent retreat at his monastery in Rangoon. ↵

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Introduction to Noting Meditation

“Labeling technique helps us to perceive clearly the actual qualities of our experience, without getting immersed in the content.” (Sayadaw U Pandita, [In This Very Life](#))

The common thread among all meditation techniques is the activity of bringing attention to experience. One way of doing this is to label (note) your experience, silently or aloud, as it happens. This is the premise of the noting technique, the powerhouse of the yogi toolbox. In noting, we label our experience using one or two-word notes, at a consistent pace. Whatever has our attention in any moment can be noted, and I recommend noting at a pace of between one and three seconds per note.

Here’s a quick experiment to give you a taste of noting. Ask yourself which of the senses is predominant in this moment. Is it seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, or smelling? Whichever it is, label it as such. If you hear a car go by, say “hearing”. If you see these words, say “seeing”. If you feel the weight of your body on the chair, say “feeling”. I’m simply asking you to notice which of the senses is predominant in your experience in this moment. Continue to note in this way every one to three seconds: seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, or smelling. You may soon notice another aspect of experience: thinking. Buddhism identifies six sense doors, including the five body senses along with thinking as the sixth sense. When thinking comes up, notice that it’s just more sensory input; thinking happens automatically and without your control, just like seeing or hearing.

The beauty of the noting technique is that as long as you are noting continuously, every few seconds, you are paying attention to something happening in the present moment. You’re meditating! If you notice that more than a few seconds have passed since your last note, that is simply a reminder to resume noting.

Noting has three main functions:

1. Noting keeps you on track by giving you a feedback loop. (If you stop noting, that in itself can be a sign that you have wandered off track, giving you the heads-up that it’s time to refocus.)
2. Noting helps ensure that you have clearly objectified and and therefore dis-embedded from whatever you are experiencing.

3. Noting keeps the mind engaged to the point where there is very little processing power left for needless suffering in the form of rumination or worry.

Noting harnesses the power of the feedback loop, allowing you to stay on track throughout the meditation session; less time spent in drifting or mind-wandering results in more efficient use of precious practice time, something that is especially important for those of us who practice in daily life. Noting can be done both on and off the cushion. Noting is failure-proof; it doesn't matter what you're noting, as long as you are noting. The benefits of noting are realized irrespective of whether your meditation is pleasant or unpleasant. A session spent noting boredom, irritation, frustration, and aversion to noting is considered as successful as a session where everything is groovy and pleasant. The objective is not to have nothing but pleasant experiences, but rather to clearly objectify whatever the experience happens to be.

I first learned the noting technique from Bill Hamilton and continued to refine it under the direction my Asian teachers from the Mahasi lineage. The traditional Mahasi instructions for noting while following the breath are valuable and are presented later in this chapter, but most of my students have better luck with choiceless noting at first. I recommend beginning with "four categories" noting and experimenting with other styles once you feel comfortable with the basic technique.

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[Noting with 5 Senses \(with video\) →](#)

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Noting with 5 Senses (with video)

The five senses are seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling. Here is a one-minute video demonstrating the technique:

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Noting with 6 Senses

The six sense doors are seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, and thinking. Anything we experience must necessarily fall under one of these categories. The brain forms a holistic experience from all of the streams of sensory experience, but it is possible to zoom in and notice which of the senses is taking center stage in any given moment.

When noting at the level of the six sense doors, it isn't necessary to drill down to specifics. We just notice which of the sense doors is predominant in this moment. Simply note "seeing," "hearing," "touching (or feeling)," "tasting," "smelling," or "thinking," silently or aloud every few seconds.

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[Glossary →](#)

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Glossary

concentration: The ability to sustain attention on an object (or objects) with minimal distraction.

ñana: (Pali) Insight knowledge.

objectify: Turn toward. Look at. See clearly. Take as object. Identify.

samadhi: (Pali) The condition or state of concentration, i.e., sustaining attention on an object (or objects) with minimal distraction.

samatha: (Pali) Activity of concentration, i.e., sustaining attention on an object (or objects) with minimal distraction.

yogi: Person who meditates.

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