

PART III: THE STAGES LEADING TO EXCLUSIVE FOCUS ON THE MEDITATION OBJECT - SINGLE-POINTED ATTENTION - THE PRACTICE OF AWARENESS & INTENTION

This marks the real beginning of *Skilled Concentration*. As was explained in the Introduction, *concentration* has two aspects to it – the ability to *continuously attend* to the object of investigation without being distracted, and the ability to *focus the attention exclusively* on that object. *Concentration* will be a term that we will want to be able to use repeatedly with a clear and consistent meaning. So let us say that whenever we use the word concentration in the context of meditation we will be referring to the concept of *Skilled Concentration*, and this concept will be defined as the ability

- to direct the attention to any *intentionally* chosen object of conscious awareness,
- to continue to sustain the attention upon that object of conscious awareness for as long as one *intentionally* chooses to do so,
- to attend *exclusively* to that object, and
- to investigate that object with whatever degree of narrowness or breadth of focus one chooses.

Thus *skilled* concentration can be distinguished from *ordinary* concentration in that it is entirely intentional (attention is directed to the object rather than drawn to it, and sustained rather than captured), it is stable, and it is highly focused. The mastery of stages 1 through three accomplished the first two components of skilled concentration. In Part III we discuss mastery of stages 4 through 6, which completes the development of Skilled Concentration with the attainment of stage 7.

We can also distinguish an even more advanced skill level of concentration that we might call *Adept Concentration* in which

- the stability and focus of skilled concentration can be sustained *effortlessly*;
- the degree of focus can be intentionally varied *without loss of stability*;
- conscious awareness can be shifted from one object to another, being sustained on each object for any period of time, however short or long that period may be, *without losing the stability or effortless quality* of sustained and focused attention;
- skilled concentration can be readily evoked without progressing through intermediate stages of concentration development.

The cultivation of Adept Concentration in stages 7 through 10 will be the subject of Part IV.

Continuity of attention to this point has been arrived at through a progression of longer and longer periods without interruption until the meditation object never leaves conscious awareness from beginning to end of the sitting practice. Thus

continuity is conceived of as an absolute quality – attention is either continuous or it is interrupted.

Exclusivity of focus of the attention on the meditation object, on the other hand, is not only progressive but is also of a more obviously relative nature. In other words, there are varying *degrees* of exclusivity, depending upon the breadth or narrowness of focus.

The opposite of focused attention is, of course, diffused or scattered attention, something we have already discussed. Scattering of attention is of two types – the obvious scattering to ***distractions*** in the form of the ongoing procession of sensations, thoughts, memories, images, or emotions present in the awareness *in addition to* the primary object of attention; and the somewhat less obvious scattering to ***dullness***. The stage 4 meditator can readily observe the effects of distractions and dullness in causing scattering of attention, and learns to recognize it whenever it has occurred. *Scattering due to either cause takes the form of a loss of intensity and vividness of perception of the meditation object.*

When distractions become strong enough, numerous enough, or persistent enough to displace the primary meditation object from the central focus of the attention, they are termed ***gross distractions***, but when they remain in the background they are termed ***subtle distractions***. Drowsiness and the state characterized by dreamlike hypnogogic imagery is termed ***strong dullness***, while the simple loss of intensity and vividness of the perception meditation object without either drowsiness or distortion of perception is termed ***subtle dullness***.

So the development of ***exclusive focus*** proceeds by stages through the elimination of gross distraction and strong dullness, which is accomplished in stage 4; the attenuation of subtle dullness (a progressive process), which is accomplished in stage 5; and the virtual, although not total, elimination of subtle distractions, which is accomplished in stage 6. Stage 7 is characterized by exclusive focus on the meditation object.

There is also a progressive qualitative change in the nature of the distractions, which over time come to be:

- more predominantly to do with the immediate present and the primary object of attention,
- less verbal,
- less conceptual, and
- fewer and more indistinctly perceived.

Eventually they become rare and barely register in conscious awareness.

From the 4th stage on, there is an increasing likelihood that the meditator will have occasional experiences of unusual physical sensations, perceptions of luminosity or color, pleasant physical sensations, and brief periods of unaccountable happiness or joy. There is very little to be gained by pursuing these experiences

before the 7th stage has been mastered, so it is best to just treat them as any other distraction, try not to be caught up in them (very difficult to do the first few times they occur), and just let them arise and pass away. These phenomena occur whenever the mind becomes quite still, or is at least fully present in the here and now. If the 6th and 7th stages have not been mastered and effortless concentration has not yet been achieved, the stillness of mind will not persist very long, the experience will pass, and its reoccurrence will be unpredictable and uncontrollable. The occurrence of dullness during one of these episodes will tend to cause an abrupt transition to another state of mind. Otherwise, as the mind becomes agitated, there will be a more gradual deterioration into a distinctly distracted state. These experiences help the meditator to appreciate the importance of mastery of those skills that give rise to consistency and stability.

The objective at this point is to cultivate the ability to achieve that degree of stillness on a consistent basis and to sustain it. Until this objective has been accomplished, these are just tastes of what is to come, and should not be allowed to interfere with the ongoing cultivation of attention, awareness, and intention.

The level of exclusive focus that is the goal of the practice in the meditation stages described in Part III is characterized by the virtual, but not total absence of subtle distractions. Upon mastery of the 6th stage and entry into the 7th stage, awareness of thoughts, most often directly related to the events of the present moment, as well as of sounds, bodily sensations, and internal mental states, is *intermittently* present, but without the power to draw the attention away from the meditation object. At more refined levels of exclusive focus even these cease to be present.

NB: In the descriptions that follow, two conceptual models are introduced, one of consciousness as consisting of discrete moments of conscious awareness, each defined by its object, and the other of Mind as consisting of a composite of several separate 'minds', or consciousnesses. These models are introduced as an aid to understanding, and although they are derived directly from traditional Buddhist literature, they should not be taken as a literal description of absolute truth, and neither embraced nor refuted on that basis. A conceptual model, like any other kind of model, is not to be mistaken for that which it attempts to represent. Conceptual models, and the concepts they consist of, are mental constructs that stand in place of direct experience. They are the means by which discursive, analytical thought processes make sense of experience and construct a functional world view. But they are not, and can never be truly accurate representations of experiential reality. Also bear in mind that the words used in the description of the models are subject to different understandings and interpretations by different people, and particularly where there are pre-existing notions related to what is being described, there will be a natural tendency to interpret the words in a way that is consistent with the ideas already present in the mind.

On the other hand, within their proper context, these models can provide a useful guide for investigation and discovery of the underlying phenomenon that they represent.

4. Uninterrupted Continuity of Attention to the Meditation Object

A. THE SITTING PRACTICE

With uninterrupted continuity of attention, the meditator finds herself becoming familiar with a new kind of ‘mental landscape’. She notices that, although awareness of the meditation object is always present, there are many other things present in the awareness at the same time.

There is an ongoing flow of sensory information from the body. Warm and cool sensations, pressure, aches, tingling, itches, etc; sounds, occasional odors, shifting patterns of light behind closed eyes, or opened eyes that suddenly focus on an object, even if just for a moment. And there is an even more constant flow of mental events – thoughts and self-talk related to those thoughts, ongoing verbal commentary on the meditation, images, memories, and emotions.

It is too much for the meditator to expect at this point that she will be able to stop all of this mental activity and heightened sensory awareness, so the objective at this stage is simply to make sure that the meditation object is always at the primary focus of attention, and that these distractions remain in the periphery of awareness, rather than vice versa. Using our earlier terminology, the objective at this stage is to overcome the tendency for scattering of attention in the form of *gross distraction*, while tolerating *subtle distraction* for the time being.

The basic process is exactly the same as in stages 2 and 3, except that the problem has changed and instead of the mind wandering to the extent that the meditation object is forgotten, the mind is allowing something other than the meditation object to become the primary focus of attention. The *intentional* application of *introspective awareness in the form of vigilance* alerts the meditator that this has occurred, then the attention is directed back to the meditation object, which is fully engaged with once again. By now there has developed considerable familiarity with the details of the breath cycle, so now the breath can be followed quite closely but in a much more relaxed way.

Dealing with gross distractions

Most of the time, *gross distraction* is overcome by recognizing its presence through *vigilance*, followed by ‘letting go of’ or ‘setting aside’ the distraction while gently *directing the attention* back to the meditation object, and then actively engaging with the meditation object using *full-minded awareness* to help *sustain the attention* on it. But occasionally the distraction will be so strong and persistent that this is not enough.

The special challenges provided by the distractions at this stage are two-fold: firstly, the meditator begins to find that there is a quality of increasing intensity and unpleasantness to the physical sensations that arise; and secondly, the distracting thoughts tend to become more interesting, attractive, and seemingly important, and the emotions that arise have a predominant quality of urgency, restlessness, and impatience. The result is that the meditator's earlier satisfaction at having achieved uninterrupted continuity of attention begins to fade as they find themselves experiencing more physical discomfort and an increasingly agitated state. The remedy is not to allow oneself to become disturbed by these difficulties, not to become discouraged or to engage in negative judgments about one's progress, but simply to continue to engage as fully as possible with the meditation object and cultivate an ever increasing full-minded awareness of the meditation object.

Dealing with pain

One form such distractions take is bodily sensations of pain, numbness, tingling, itching, etc. When these become too strong to simply be set aside, the meditator will need to address them more directly. Now, it is probably good at this point to mention once again that one should be sitting in the most consistently comfortable position that can be found. Additional pillows or whatever other aids are found to be useful should be employed to compensate for any back, knee, or hip problems that may be present. But even having done so, it is not unusual to find there are still some strongly distracting physical pains or other sensations. When this occurs, one directs the mind to the sensation, taking it as the meditation object in the same way the sensations of the breath are normally used. Investigate the sensation, examining its various qualities and how it changes as it is investigated. Search within the sensation for the source of the quality of unpleasantness. Often the pain will just fade or disappear entirely, and at other times it will remain but will lose its intensity. This is the time to return the attention to the sensations of the breath, and repeat the process as often as necessary if the pain returns.

There will be times when the painful sensation does not subside and the meditator must continue with it as meditation object. Training the mind to remain focused using painful sensations as the object will be just as effective as using the sensations of the breath, investigation of painful sensations is no less effective in cultivating mindful awareness, and much can be learned in the process about the nature of pain and the mind's reaction to it. To use painful sensations most effectively, one must resist for as long as possible any urge to move to relieve the pain or scratch the itch. Then, when the urge to move can no longer be resisted, the movement should be performed very deliberately, and the results closely observed. What will most often be experienced is that, although the pain in one place is relieved by the movement, now there is a new pain somewhere else. Recognizing this fact will make it easier for the meditator to focus on the pain and investigate it rather than focusing on the desire to do something to relieve it. And it is not unusual to discover that the pain is not even physical in origin. When this

is the case, even without moving the pain might disappear when the attention is focused upon it, only to show up again in a different place a short time later.

With a little time the meditator will ‘get past’ the pain in the sense that it either fades to insignificance in intensity and becomes difficult to locate even if looked for, or else it continues to be present as a strong sensation but loses the quality of painfulness (in which case it can be set aside in favor of the primary meditation object), or it retains the quality of painfulness but the mind can so effectively disregard it that it is no longer important as a potential distraction.

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that we are not talking about suppressing or ignoring pain that is of a definite physical origin. To the extent that it is possible to eliminate or alleviate physical pain through the use of cushions or other devices or by adopting a different meditation posture, these things should be done first. It is the pain that remains after everything else has been done that the meditator ‘gets beyond’ through practice. The meditator should also not be overly concerned at this time about the measures they may need to take to assure they can sit comfortably for the duration of the meditation session. As they make further progress, they will find it becomes much less of a problem, and they will no longer need to rely on external aids for comfort to the same degree. Just do what is necessary now to keep the physical body from interfering with the training of the mind.

The problem of discursive brilliance

Another form the distractions take is that of very attractive thoughts and ideas. Amongst the distracting thoughts that arise as gross distractions, there are often brilliant insights into matters of great importance to the meditator. These can be of a personal nature, or of a philosophical and metaphysical nature. Breakthroughs in understanding of Dhamma matters are not unusual. These insights are typically quite valid and very useful, and so can be quite irresistible. In the stable state of the stage 4 meditator who is anchored to the continuous awareness of the meditation object, at least in the periphery of the attention if not at the center, the powers of discursive analysis and the ability to make powerful new connections between concepts is awesome. If the meditator pursues these, rather than resolving to address them at another time and returning the focus of attention to the meditation object, *it becomes a trap*. Once the analysis has been completed, the meditator will be overcome with a restless ‘mission accomplished’ feeling, and will find it very difficult to return to the meditation. This may lead to the meditator actively seeking another subject for discursive analysis, or abandoning the meditation altogether. Worst of all, each time the meditator indulges in this way, she virtually guarantees that similar compelling issues will come to mind next time she meditates. It is not unusual for this process to lead to an extended period of psychotherapeutic self-analysis, and the more emotional and psychic trauma the meditator has endured in the past, the more likely this is to be so. And if not this, then the meditator will often find themselves drawn into an extensive intellectual analysis of philosophical issues.

The power of the mind in this focused state is a wonderful thing to experience, but it needs to be utilized in the form of a separate practice that is kept distinct from the development of concentration and awareness, otherwise further progress in concentration and awareness will be much impaired. The application of discursive analysis constitutes an extremely valuable practice ***that will be described separately***. Analytical meditation is itself a very important component of the Mahayana Vipasyana system of Union of Calm Abiding and Wisdom. It can be usefully applied from this stage onwards, but reaches its full power at stage 8, from which point it can actually be used as an alternative method for generating stage 9 and 10 meditative experiences or even mastery of these final stages.

When the meditator finds herself engaged in discursive thought on an important and meaningful topic, she should make a mental note of it and save it for another time, resolving to set aside another time specifically for analytical meditation in order to pursue it. At that later time, she can bring herself once again to a state of uninterrupted continuity of attention to the meditation object, then allow the awareness of the breath to be sustained in the background of awareness while engaging in discursive analysis of the chosen topic. This is an extremely useful meditation technique in its own right, but it needs to be performed *on a separate occasion*, and must not be allowed to interfere with the practice we are describing here.

Sometimes it will happen that the thought that arises is either so emotionally charged or so laden with personal insight that it keeps coming back over and over and can't be saved for later. When that happens it must be acknowledged and accepted – but not pursued discursively. It can be held in awareness simply as an object of attention until its intensity subsides to the point that the primary meditation object can be taken up once again.

Another form of gross distraction at this stage can be a mental state characterized by a strong sense of impatience and restlessness. Rather than try to ignore or suppress it, it is best to acknowledge it with a simple recognition such as “So this is the restlessness that arises at this stage. It will pass.” Then redirect the attention back to the meditation object. Sometimes it will be too strong to be dismissed so easily. If this happens, then treat it in the same way as physical pain, and take it as the meditation object for a while, thoroughly investigating the nature of restlessness and impatience.

Dealing with strong dullness

As soon as the meditator has acquired some facility in dealing with agitation and distractions, dullness becomes a problem. Once the mind ceases to be agitated, it tends to slip right into dullness. There is an ongoing balancing act in this stage between agitation and dullness, and much of the 4th stage can be characterized as alternation between agitation and dullness.

Strong dullness is always preceded by subtle dullness, and although subtle dullness does not always lead to strong dullness, in this stage of the practice it usually does. If the vigilance of introspective awareness alerts the meditator that subtle dullness is increasing, then the meditator **raises the energy level of the mind** through an increased **vigorousness of intention** to observe every detail of the meditation object.

If, instead, strong dullness is already present, then stronger remedies such as those described in stage 3 must be used. And if the energy level of the mind hasn't been sufficiently increased, strong dullness will very quickly return. There is typically a distinct 'sinking' feeling, or perhaps a mental 'sluggishness' that can be likened to walking in deep mud. On the other hand, when the mind is successfully re-energized, there is a noticeable 'brightening', a feeling of lightness and alertness. The meditator learns to recognize both the sinking sensation of unresolved dullness and the brightening of the successfully re-energized mind. If she goes too far, which often happens early on, then agitation returns.

The increased energy level of the mind allows the meditator to avoid strong dullness, and with practice and over time the meditator's **power to direct and sustain the attention** allows the mind to function at a higher energy level without succumbing to agitation and gross distraction. It is necessary to tolerate a certain amount of subtle dullness initially in order to achieve this balance, so overcoming that subtle dullness becomes the primary objective of the next stage in the practice. The way subtle dullness manifests at this stage is as a more 'relaxed' focus on the meditation object, making the mind a bit less agitated, and also allowing for the ongoing **vigilance of introspective awareness** to monitor the mind for the presence of gross distraction.

Dullness provides its own special challenge because strong dullness can also become a trap. It is common for strong dullness to be associated with hypnagogic imagery, archetypal visions, an emotional feeling that something very profound is occurring, and with strongly pleasurable sensations in the body. With the continuing awareness of the meditation object as an anchor, these states can be sustained for long periods of time without progressing to the stage of sleep. Channeling of other beings may occur as a part of this experience. While these states may be deliberately cultivated as a part of certain shamanic and other practices, they do not belong to the cultivation of concentration and awareness, and so should be avoided as a serious trap. Since the contents of these visionary experiences can't usually be deliberately invoked at a later time, the meditator can't save them for later, and must simply resolve to let them go, strengthen the intention to observe the details of primary meditation object with as much intensity and vividness as she can, and continue the practice. This may not be at all easy to do for those who are disposed to and have found deep spiritual meaning in such experiences in the past.

This and the trap described earlier with regard to gross distractions are referred to collectively as the '*trap of visions and insights*', and are characteristic of this stage of the practice..

By the time this stage has been mastered, the power of object awareness - full-minded awareness directed towards the meditation object - has reached an important threshold. Through familiarity, and habituation in particular, hardly any effort is required to closely observe and precisely identify the different parts of the breath cycle. And although the observation of the meditation object cannot be said to be non-conceptual, it is certainly non-discursive and non-verbal. There is no more need for mental processing in the identification of the pause between the out- and the in-breath than there is in distinguishing the head or the hand of another person's body when it is seen with the eyes. There is instead an immediacy of recognition of each event in the breath cycle as it occurs. Furthermore, by now there should be a clear awareness of the relative changes in depth and duration of in- and out-breaths overtime and relative changes in the duration of the pauses as well. There should also be an awareness of how these changes in the breath are associated with changes in the relative degree of agitation or dullness of the mind on an almost breath by breath basis.

B. The Non-Sitting Practice

Walking meditation

As a variation in your walking meditation practice, spend some time where you use the sensations associated with the act of walking as the meditation object, rather than just as an anchor to help you stay in the present moment. If you can, spend a ½ hour at a time doing this in addition to the ½ hour you spend doing the walking practice of just staying in the present moment. If you can't spend that much time, then spend half of your walking meditation period, whatever that happens to be, on this new practice. To do this, you will want to walk very, very slowly, at least at first. Walking very slowly will allow you to notice more clearly all of the details of the stepping cycle. It will also help you to remain focused, since slow walking is not automatic and you need to attend closely to maintain your balance and coordination while walking.

Choose a place to practice slow walking that is about 15 or 20 feet long so that you can just walk back and forth, or else choose a place where you can walk in a circle. Your path should be very simple, unobstructed, and non-distracting.

The stages of the stepping cycle that you can readily observe are 1) shifting of the weight away from the foot that is to be lifted and onto the other foot, 2) lifting the foot, 3) moving the foot forward, 4) lowering the foot, 5) placing the foot, then 1) shifting the weight again, 2) lifting..., 3)moving..., 4) lowering..., 5) placing..., 1) shifting....

In the beginning, focus the attention primarily on the sensations in the sole of the foot, and the actual movements of the foot. Notice the quality of your awareness as you try to be simultaneously aware of the decreasing pressure on the sole of one foot and the increasing pressure on the other. It may seem daunting at first, but you will be surprised at how quickly your mind adapts. Then expand your awareness to include the sensations of the muscles in the legs, the tensing of the muscles as the weight is shifted onto one leg, the relaxation of the muscles in the other leg, the contraction of the muscles that raise the leg, then of the muscles that move the leg, then the relaxation of the lifting muscles as the foot is placed on the ground. Practice slow walking with the sensations of walking as primary object of attention, while keeping thoughts and all other sensations to the periphery of the awareness.

Do the practice exactly as described above for as many practice sessions as it takes to feel comfortable and competent with it. Thereafter, following a few minutes of closely following the sensations of walking, just stop walking and direct your attention to all of the tactile and other bodily sensations that are present in addition to your feet and legs, and meditate on these sensations for a few minutes or longer. Resume walking. After a several more minutes of closely following the sensations of walking, stop and direct your attention to your sense of hearing and meditate on the sounds that are present for a few minutes or longer. Just open your consciousness up to sound, and take it all in. Resume walking. After a few minutes more, stop and direct your attention to your visual field and meditate on visual sensations for a few minutes or longer. Resume walking. Continue to alternate meditating on the sensations of walking with stopping and meditating on the contents of these three sensory fields with a frequency and duration that is comfortable and enjoyable. While examining the contents of these various sensory fields, you may think about them, but *non-verbally*. When the thoughts start forming into words, just let the words go. There will, of course, be a certain amount of ‘forgetting’ in which verbal discursive thoughts take place. When this happens, just be pleased with yourself when you become aware of it and then just ‘dismiss the words’. Maintain an attitude of exploration and enjoyment as much as possible.

Do the practice exactly as described above for a few sessions or as many sessions as it takes to feel comfortable and competent with it. Once you have become comfortable with it, thereafter *do not* stop walking when redirecting your attention to these other sensory fields. When meditating on the sensations associated with walking, you are always still aware of other bodily sensations, sounds, and visual objects, but they are in the periphery of the attention while the sensations of walking are the focus. Just so, when you redirect your attention to other sensations, you continue to walk, so you will continue to be aware of the sensations of walking, but those sensations of walking are now more in the periphery of awareness while the other sensations are the focus. So you are in effect practicing controlling the focus of your attention even while there are other objects of awareness present in consciousness, and maintaining that same quality

of focus as you redirect your attention. You can expect to enjoy some novel insights into the ways the mind works as you do this practice. Maintain an attitude of exploration and enjoyment. Feel free to think about your experience, but non-verbally.

Do the practice exactly as described above for as many sessions as it takes to feel comfortable and competent with it. Once you have become comfortable with the practice as described above, make it less structured, and direct your attention whenever and towards whatever of interest that happens to arise in one of these sensory fields. If you have been doing this practice in a relatively closed and uninteresting environment, go outdoors now or otherwise relocate to a space with a greater variety of stimuli. So now you will be walking slowly with your attention focused primarily on the sensations associated with walking, and then there may be novel sensation, a breeze perhaps, or a pleasant warmth as you step from shade into sunlight. Intentionally redirect your attention to this sensation, make it the focus of your attention while awareness of the sensations of walking continue in the background, explore it, enjoy it, and when you are done with it, return to the sensations of walking. Do the same with sounds and visual objects. Maintain control over your attention while allowing it to take in the totality of your experience. Maintain an attitude of exploration and enjoyment. Feel free to think about your experience, but non-verbally. If at any point you begin to experience this practice as difficult or tedious, then stop walking, relax, and examine the state of your mind. You will almost certainly find that you were not really in the present moment.

By now this practice will probably have become the totality of your walking meditation practice, and if not, it should be, because you are now staying in the present moment as before, silently as before, the important difference being the disciplined and focused attention you have developed. Sometimes you will be inclined to remain closely focused on the walking. Other times you will be more inclined to an exploration of a variety of sensory experiences with a greatly heightened awareness. You may also notice a sense of joy that spontaneously develops with this practice. Encourage that joyful state of mind. It is a very important component of the practice.

Full-minded awareness of daily activities

In the course of a normal day, there will be numerous situations where you will be engaged in a routine task, but your mind will be elsewhere. Driving a vehicle, washing dishes, eating lunch are some examples. Each of these situations is an opportunity to practice full-minded awareness of the present moment. When you become aware of such an opportunity, bring your awareness into the present, engage fully in the activity as a meditation. Explore the full range of sensory experience that makes up the present moment, even going beyond the immediate task at hand. Employ the skills you have developed in your walking practice.

Mindful awareness of the breath

Continue to practice mindful awareness of the breath for a few moments at a time, whenever the opportunity presents itself.

In addition, practice mindful awareness of the breath in bed at night before sleeping. When doing so, be particularly aware of the changes in consciousness that take place as you move into sleep. Notice the similarities with the dullness you have experienced in sitting practice. This is a wonderful opportunity to study dullness when you are not trying to resist it. Notice its pleasant qualities.

Summary

The instruction for this stage is as follows: Continue to follow the sensation of the breath at the tip of the nose. In addition to observing the exact moment the in-breath begins and ends, and the out-breath begins and ends, and the pauses between the in and out-breaths, also be aware of relative changes in the duration of the pauses and the in and out breaths as they occur. Continue to work towards eliminating the verbal component of thoughts. Strive to be continuously conscious of the quality of awareness of the meditation object. When you notice that gross distraction is present, bring the focus of the attention back to the meditation object. When you notice that strong dullness is present, strengthen your intention to observe the details of the breath clearly. Resist the temptation to indulge in discursive thought or visionary experiences.

So what has been accomplished in this stage is that:

Intentional introspective awareness in the form of ***vigilance*** becomes a habit, detecting either ***gross distraction*** or ***strong dullness*** whenever present. Rather than arising intermittently, introspective awareness has come to be more or less continuously present.

The power to ***direct and sustain the attention*** has been developed through the continued cultivation of ***full-minded awareness*** so that it serves to prevent gross distraction from occurring, rather than overcoming gross distraction through loss of mental energy and increasing dullness.

The ***energy level of the mind is sustained*** through ***vigorous intention*** to observe the meditation object with ***vivid intensity*** to the extent that strong dullness does not arise, but not to the degree that excessive agitation occurs.

The meditator has learned to find the balance point between the over-energized agitated mind and the de-energized dull mind. To do this, she is willing to tolerate both subtle dullness and subtle distraction while maintaining a state of vigilant awareness.

The fourth stage has been mastered and freedom from gross distractions and strong dullness has been achieved when the physical sensations, thoughts, images, memories and emotions that arise and pass away no longer have the ability to displace the meditation object as the primary focus of attention; and when strong dullness no longer causes the meditation object to become faint and to take on hypnagogic distortions.

Noticeable benefits of practice: Ordinary concentration is improved, and the meditator has a greatly enhanced ability to analyse, observe, and think clearly.

5. SUSTAINING AND INCREASING FULL-MINDED AWARENESS

A. THE SITTING PRACTICE

In this stage of practice, with greatly increased stability of attention to the meditation object, there is a strong tendency for subtle dullness to become firmly established. Now free from gross distraction and strong dullness, the meditator is primarily concerned with overcoming *subtle dullness*, and therefore with further increasing and then sustaining the quality of *full-mindedness of awareness*, which manifests as vivid intensity of perception of the meditation object. Subtle distractions in the form of physical sensations and ongoing mental activity *in the periphery* of the awareness will continue to be tolerated.

During this stage the *introspective aspect* of full-minded awareness will be developed until it has the same power that *object awareness* has already acquired. What this means is that the activity which the mind is currently engaged in is continuously monitored with an awareness not only of the nature of the activity and its appropriateness in terms of intention, but also an awareness of the relative degree of dullness or intensity that characterizes it.

To recapitulate, well developed object awareness applied to the breath as meditation object allows the meditator:

- 1) to observe with vividness and intensity and without interruption each detail of the sensations of the breath as they unfold during the respiratory cycle;
- 2) to notice the qualities such as duration of the main parts of the respiratory cycle relative to each other (i.e. is the in-breath longer or shorter, deeper or shallower as compared to the out-breath, of the two pauses, which is longer and which is shorter); and
- 3) to be aware of changes in the relative qualities of the main parts of the breath cycle over time (i.e. is the in-breath longer or shorter than before, is the out-breath longer or shorter than before, of the two pauses is the longer one now the same one that was longer before).

Similarly, when introspective awareness is well-developed the meditator will:

- 1) know the current activity of the mind in the present moment and its contents (i.e. is the mind primarily attending to the meditation object or not, and to what degree are other objects of awareness also present in the periphery of the attention);
- 2) be continuously aware that the intention is to observe the meditation object with as much vividness and intensity as possible *without increasing the level of agitation and the intensity of awareness of objects other than the meditation object*, and will know whether that intention is being fulfilled or not; and
- 3) know whether the relative degree of dullness or intensity is increasing or decreasing over time.

By this time the meditator will have noticed that as the degree of agitation and subtle distraction increases, the vividness and intensity of the meditation object decreases, and as subtle distraction diminishes, the acuity of perception of the meditation object increases. In general when, amongst the various awarenesses seemingly simultaneously present in the mind, the attention favors one, the others are diminished. The meditator may also have noticed that dullness produces exactly the same kind of qualitative change in vividness and intensity of perception as does distraction. If these things have not already been noticed, then it is a good idea at this stage for the meditator to spend some time experimenting and observing a bit and noticing what does happen as the focus of attention shifts and as distractions and dullness increase and decrease.

There are two main obstacles to overcoming subtle dullness. The first is learning to recognize it, and most especially to recognize when it has increased. Subtle dullness manifests as a diminished intensity and vividness of perception. With the stability of attention present at this stage, the meditator readily observes the moment by moment shifts in vividness of perception that occur with the ebb and flow of subtle distractions. These are qualitatively the same as the shifts in vividness and intensity that occur with changes in the degree of dullness that is present. The principle difference is that dullness induces a gradual, often almost imperceptible decline in the intensity and vividness of perception. The meditator must become skilled at recognizing when this has occurred, and then take appropriate action to increase the intensity of awareness again. As before, it is the continual exercise of *introspective awareness* that alerts the meditator to the presence of subtle dullness, and it is the increase in *conscious intention* to observe with intensity and clarity that counteracts it.

One very useful indicator of the presence of subtle dullness is the ‘startle reaction’. If some disturbance like an unexpected sound, someone coughing or a door slamming or the ringing of the bell to indicate the end of the meditation session for example, causes one to jerk, or to even inwardly feel startled, then dullness was present. *The greater the degree of full-minded awareness, the more difficult it is to startle someone.*

The second obstacle to overcoming subtle dullness is its attractiveness. Subtle dullness can be pleasant. In fact, except when we are resisting it, dullness in general is pleasant, and that is perhaps why it is so sought after through drugs, alcohol, and mindless entertainment. It is possible to train oneself to remain in a state of subtle dullness while in meditation, and so to enjoy the sense of comfort and pleasure this engenders. Think of the mental state of complete relaxation you might experience sitting in a very comfortable chair with your eyes closed under a beach umbrella on a warm day. Or think of the pleasant relaxed state you can enter into while resting and relaxing in a comfortable chair after a holiday feast. You are not asleep or even sleepy, you are aware of what is going on in your surroundings, and your mind may even seem to be clear, and you are pervaded by a sense of comfort and well-being, but you are also not really alert. This is the kind of subtle dullness that can be cultivated in meditation and mistaken for the blissful states that are described for meditation. And the other attraction of dullness is that it provides the illusion of having succeeded in achieving exclusive focus of attention and one-pointed concentration. Because the mind is so still, many of the effects associated with exclusive focus may be experienced, such as illumination and particularly pleasant states of mind. But it is a dead end and it is a trap. This can be referred to as the *trap of subtle dullness*.

Having avoided being trapped by the attractiveness of subtle dullness, and having learned to recognize its presence, the meditator continues to cultivate her *ongoing vigilance* and direct it such that she becomes aware if the perception of the meditation object has become diminished in this way. When it has, she then must apply the power of intention to bringing back its full vividness and intensity.

But we need to recall that our normal level of awareness always involves some degree of dullness, and that only rarely in our lives have most of us experienced an extreme degree of full-minded awareness. This means that in this stage of the practice we should also always be trying to further increase the vividness and intensity of our perception, and so will be setting new standards of awareness for ourselves. The following method, known as '*experiencing the body with the breath*', is a powerful tool for developing increasingly full-minded awareness, and so overcoming subtle dullness.

A method for achieving increasingly full-minded awareness

1. If you have previously been observing the sensation of the breath at the tip of the nose, shift your attention now to the surface of the abdomen, and observe the *sensations* associated with the in-breath and the out-breath. Drop (as much as possible) all conceptualization of breath, and air, and movement while focusing purely on the sensation, becoming fully aware of its various qualities and changes.
2. Once the mind is stable and well established in observing the sensations of the breath at the abdomen, then *without losing awareness of the breath*, choose an isolated area of the body far from the abdomen, one where you

would not expect to be able to feel sensations related to breathing. Using the foot for example, shift the attention to the front half of one foot. Thoroughly examine the sensation in that part of the foot, without losing awareness of the breath. Investigate in particular whether there is any *change* in any of the sensations in the foot associated with the in- or out-breath (there probably will not be). Do the same thing with the back half of the same foot. Examine the sensations in the whole foot, still keeping awareness of the breath and watching for any changes in sensation with the breath. Repeat for the other foot. Now examine the sensations in the both feet at once, all the while alert for any sensations that change with the breath. Do the same again for the calf and lower leg, first one leg, then the other, then both legs and both feet at once. Focus in once again to an isolated area like the heel or the knee.

3. Continue to explore your entire body in the same way, first closely examining the sensation in isolated areas, then larger areas, whole body regions, and ultimately being aware of the whole body at once.

There is no special significance to my having used the feet as the starting point for the instruction on how to explore the sensations in the body. I could have as easily chosen the top of one ear, and then progressed over the scalp and the face. Which part of the body you start with and the sequence of the exploration does not matter except to the degree that you may have a personal preference that works better for you as an individual. The point is to closely examine the *sensations* in *every single part of the body*, first in very small, highly focused areas, then in larger areas, and ultimately being able to alternate between focusing on the sensation in the tip of one finger (for example) to being aware of the entire body at once. Always maintaining awareness of the breath, of course, and particularly searching for sensations that change as one breathes in and out.

As you progress through the body you will eventually reach areas where there are observable changes in sensation with the breath, such as the lower back, shoulders, upper arms perhaps, and the upper back, chest and abdomen definitely. Wherever there is any change in sensation with the breath, linger for a while and explore those sensations thoroughly. Shift back and forth between broadening and tightening your focus.

Practicing this method regularly, over time you will find that your awareness of sensation becomes sharper and clearer. Eventually you will be able to detect subtle nuances of change in sensation with the breath in every part of the body. At first the sensations detected are of a gross physical nature due to changes in pressure, movement of bodily structures relative to one another or to clothing and other external objects, etc. But then there also develops a sensitivity to much more subtle sensation. And at some point it will become obvious what is meant by 'the flow of

prana', 'the movement of the inner winds', the 'constrictions of the energy flow at the chakras', and so on.

4. When you have explored the sensations in the entire body this way, sit for a while being aware of the whole body, being particularly aware of any and all sensations in the body that change with the breath.

After you have been doing this practice regularly for some time, the intensity of your awareness will become so heightened that you can observe the sensations in the whole body with as much or more clarity as you originally could with just a small area like the surface of the abdomen or the front of the foot when you first started.

After experiencing the sensations in the entire body while following the breath, tighten your focus back down to the surface of the abdomen and observe the changes in sensation with the breath in this much smaller area.

Finally, shift your focus back to the sensation of the breath at the tip of the nose.

You will find that your perception of the sensations of the breath at the tip of the nose is now noticeably sharper and more vivid and intense than it was before. Practice sustaining this heightened level of perceptual acuity for as long as you can. When it diminishes significantly, repeat the full-body scan again.

A theoretical model of conscious awareness may be helpful for understanding what the meditator is trying to do in this and subsequent stages of practice. In this model, the apparently continuous stream of conscious awareness that we ordinarily experience is regarded as consisting of numerous discontinuous, individual '*moments of consciousness*' during each of which there is a single object of awareness. The basic assumption of the model is that consciousness can only take one object of awareness at a time, so it logically follows that there must be a series of discrete moments, each of which has a beginning when a particular object first appears to awareness, and an end when consciousness takes a different object. The usual perception of being simultaneously aware of several things at once is understood to be due to these moments of consciousness being both brief and numerous, so that consciousness can take several different objects of awareness in rapid alternation.

In a given period of time, say the duration of a single in-breath, there may be many separate moments of consciousness, some of which take a pain in the knee as object of awareness, some of which take the thought of lunch as object of awareness, some of which take the mental state of restlessness as object of awareness, and the majority of which take the changing sensations produced by the breath passing through the nostrils as object. The subjective experience would be of continuous awareness of the sensations of the breath with an awareness of

the pain in the knee, thoughts of lunch and restlessness as subtle distractions in the background or periphery of awareness. If, during the subsequent out-breath, there should arise the memory of having forgotten to mail the rent check, a greater proportion of the moments of consciousness may take that memory and related thoughts as object of awareness, while relatively fewer moments of consciousness take the sensations of the breath as object of awareness. This would be experienced subjectively as the memory and thoughts about the rent check becoming a gross distraction, even though the awareness of the breath had not been lost.

When viewed from the perspective of this model, the mind-wandering that was overcome in stages 2 and 3, the gross distraction that was overcome in stage 4, the subtle distractions that are to be subdued in stage 6, and the exclusive focus of stage 7 are not qualitatively different from one another, but rather are stages in a continuum, each stage being characterized by a different proportion of moments of conscious awareness in a given interval that take the intended meditation object as object of awareness. For the intermediate practitioner, continuity of attention with scattered focus is just a more refined version of discontinuity of attention to the primary object in the novice meditator. At the level of the advanced practitioner, continuity of attention and exclusive focus cease to be two separate things, but rather exclusive focus is a more refined version of continuity of attention.

Now, if we add to our model of consciousness the idea that there may also be potential moments of conscious awareness in the stream of consciousness in which no perception of an object actually occurs, then dullness, sleep, and unconsciousness can also be understood in terms of this model. The greater the proportion of these *non-perceiving moments of consciousness* in a given interval, the more dullness is present. When the proportion becomes great enough, there are intervals of sleep or unconsciousness. Thus we can see that sleep (overcome in stages 2 & 3), gross dullness (overcome in stage 4), subtle dullness which is to be dealt with in this 5th stage, and the ultimate degree of full-minded awareness of which we are potentially capable are also stages in a continuum, each stage characterized by a different proportion of these non-perceiving moments of consciousness.

Using this model of consciousness, it can be seen that the degree of activation, or as we have previously described it, the energy level of the mind is related to the proportion of potential moments of conscious awareness where there is actual perception of an object of awareness. In the normal circumstances of our daily lives, there is constant stimulation through various kinds of sensory inputs that become objects of awareness in moments of consciousness and so maintains the energy level of the ordinary mind. When the mind is denied these stimuli by turning away from sensations, thoughts and other mental processes in favor of a non-stimulating meditation object, the energy level of the mind begins to fall and dullness increases. In earlier stages of the practice (stage 3 in particular) one tried

to maintain a balance such that one did not become so inwardly focused as to fall asleep. It should also be recalled that our ordinary level of awareness includes a considerable amount of dullness, as evidenced by our capacity for increased awareness and alertness under certain circumstances. Therefore our ordinary level of awareness involves a significant proportion of non-perceiving potential moments of conscious awareness.

So far in this model we have treated these moments of consciousness only in terms of the passive aspect of awareness. But there is also an active component to each of these moments of consciousness which we can identify as **conscious intention**. We **intend** to observe the meditation object. We **intend** to direct the attention back to the meditation object. We **intend** to direct the attention away from distractions. We **intend** to sustain the attention on the meditation object. We **intend** to engage the mind fully with the details of the meditation object. Over and over, **conscious intention** is a part of these **moments of consciousness**, and conscious intention obviously plays an important role in determining what the objects of awareness are in subsequent moments of consciousness.

And because of the role of conscious intention in determining the objects of conscious awareness in subsequent moments of consciousness, conscious intention potentially has a strong effect on the activity and energy level of the mind as well. During meditation, where external stimulation is minimized, this is particularly important. The absence of stimulation creates a tendency for an increased proportion of non-perceiving potential moments of consciousness. Non-perceiving moments of consciousness also do not generate conscious intent to perceive in subsequent moments, so they are **non-intending** as well as **non-perceiving**. And so, because these non-perceiving moments are also non-intending and thus the minded is not being directed in those moments to perceive in subsequent moments, the proportion of non-perceiving moments continues to grow, progressing from subtle dullness, to strong dullness, to sleep.

It is worth noting at this point that the strong imagery and visions and the sense of profundity that sometimes occurs in association with strong dullness is not actually a part of the dullness itself, although the dullness makes possible their arising by providing the necessary conditions. It is the large proportion of non-perceiving and therefore non-intending moments in the stream of consciousness that creates an openness and receptivity that allows the deep subconscious contents of the mind to emerge into full-consciousness. When external stimuli do not provide sensory objects of consciousness, and when awareness is not directed to particular objects through intention, then otherwise unperceived subconscious mental contents can be perceived. A similar openness and receptivity can be induced through drumming, chanting, or repetitive bodily movements, and so constitutes the basis for a variety of shamanic and other practices. In the case of these practices though, there is a deliberate prior intention set that facilitates the emergence of these objects into conscious awareness.

Subtle dullness can masquerade as exclusive focus because moments of consciousness that would otherwise have taken objects of awareness other than the meditation object, and so manifested as subtle distraction, can be converted to non-perceiving moments of consciousness.

The conscious intention in the present moment to perceive clearly during subsequent moments of consciousness will counteract the tendency for progressive dullness in the inward-turning mind. In stage 4 of the practice one learned to use the power of conscious intention to increase the energy level of the mind, and so to overcome strong dullness, but a certain amount of subtle dullness was still tolerated so that the mind did not become too agitated. Now that the mind has become well-trained in avoiding gross distraction, the *power of intention* can be used to further increase the energy level of the mind, therefore decreasing subtle dullness, and so the meditation object can take on even greater *sharpness, intensity and vividness of perception*.

B. THE NON-SITTING PRACTICE

Walking meditation

Continue the walking practice as you have done so far. Walk slowly with your attention focused primarily on the sensations associated with walking. Intentionally redirect your attention when a novel or interesting sensation presents itself, if you are inclined to do so in the moment. Let it become the new focus of your attention while continuing to sustain an awareness of the sensations of walking in the background. Exploring and enjoying, take in the experience of the present moment, always maintaining control over your attention. Whatever thoughts arise, allow them to unfold so long as they are not taking you away from the present moment. Be vigilant about inner verbalizations of thoughts, and when they are recognized, just let them go, turning the mind away from the words.

Here is a new exercise you can add to your practice: Take up once again the practice of walking very slowly while closely following the sensations associated with each part of the stepping cycle. As before, alternate walking with stopping and redirecting your attention to the sense of seeing, hearing, or the body/ tactile sensations.

Now, with your attention in the visual field, and without moving the eyes, shift your focus from nearer to farther objects, and notice how some objects are perceived clearly depending upon the focal distance, while others are perceived less clearly when out of focus. Move the eyes and observe how the object in center of the visual field is always seen most clearly, while objects in the periphery are less clear. Now focus on a single object and notice how, the more intensely you examine that object, the less clear is the perception of other objects in the visual field. Compare looking at a branch with looking at a tree, or a leaf with a branch, or a finger with a hand. None of this will be new experience of

course, but try to approach it with a fresh mind, try to experience it with the same sense of discovery as if it were the very first time.

Perhaps you might have wondered how the consciousness model of single objects of consciousness in separate moments of consciousness was reconciled with observing sensations in the hand then in the whole arm at once, and so on when scanning through the body as part of the exercise of experiencing the body with the breath. If so, look for an answer now, not through intellectual analysis but rather through direct experience.

Repeat this exercise with the sense of hearing. Much of what was experienced with the visual sense could be attributed to the unique structure and nature of the eye organ itself – it is a moveable organ with a lens, the focus of which can be changed. The ear as an organ is not as versatile, but notice how as you focus your attention on one sound, other sounds become less distinct. Notice how the quality of perception of nearby sounds changes as you listen for distant sounds, and vice versa. Attend to a very faint sound, then to a louder one. You probably have some ringing or whining or buzzing sound in your ears that is not external in origin. Notice how your perception of external sounds changes as you listen to the internal ones, and vice versa.

Repeat this exercise with the body tactile sense. This will be similar to what you do in the sitting practice when experiencing the body with the breath. These sense organs do not change and the stimuli are continuous. Yet your attention, your conscious awareness can move, focus in, expand, distinguish different component modalities of temperature and pressure and touch and movement and vibration. You have a sense of the different parts of the body, their extension in space, their location.

You may very well wonder how well the ‘discrete moments of consciousness’ model accounts for this experience. Do not analyze, but give direct experience an opportunity to provide the answer.

You might wonder just what it is that actually changes when the attention is directed from one thing to another. Take up walking again, but at a little faster, more automatic pace. Observe the way different things arise and pass away as objects of consciousness. Notice the changes of object of conscious awareness as they naturally occur, the movements of the eyes as you walk, the way your attention spontaneously shifts from one sensation to another as they arise and pass away. Pursue an understanding through observation and direct experience, not through intellectualization.

This exercise further develops introspective awareness and concentration, and cultivates the habit of *investigation*.

You will by now have become quite aware of the richness of experience offered by the present moment. You will probably have also noticed how much pleasure there is in the present moment, and that there is a *joyful happiness* that comes from simply being present. If not, then consciously open yourself up to discovering it. Welcome that sense of joy when it arises.

Full-minded awareness of daily activities

In the course of your day, when you become aware that you are performing a routine and highly automatic task, practice full-minded awareness of the present moment. In particular, practice full-minded awareness of *what your body is doing* in the present moment, why, and how it comes to be doing it in just that way. Observe the way your eyes move from object to object. Observe the way your body responds to the particular tactile, auditory or other sensations during the performance of the activity.

For example, if you are driving a car, notice the pattern of movements of the eyes, the *automatic responses* to a brake or turn signal light coming on ahead of you or a traffic signal changing. Notice the *automatic adjustments* to brake and accelerator and steering in response to visual information and proprioceptive sensations of acceleration, deceleration and rotation. Notice also those ‘special’ events that are *not automatic*, where *conscious intention* and deliberate control intervene. If you are eating, notice the automatic response of the lips and teeth and tongue to the visual and tactile perceptions of your food as it enters your mouth. Notice the changes in rate of chewing and the way the tongue shifts the bolus of food as its texture and fluidity change. Notice the effect of changes in taste and texture in bringing about the act of swallowing. Notice whenever conscious intention intervenes in the otherwise automatic process of eating.

In other words, observe the body as it goes about its business, and observe the relationship of the mind to the body.

Mindful awareness of the breath

Continue to practice mindful awareness of the breath for a few moments at a time, whenever the opportunity presents itself, and before sleeping.

Summary

The instruction for this stage is as follows: While continuing to follow the sensation of the breath as before, become continuously aware of the quality of awareness of the meditation object. When you notice that it has diminished, strengthen your intention to observe the details of the breath clearly. Resist the temptation to relax into subtle dullness. When your focus of attention and level of awareness have stabilized, shift your awareness to the surface of the abdomen, and then practice experiencing the body with the breath to further increase your quality of awareness. Return the attention to the sensation at the tip of the nose,

and practice sustaining this level of awareness. Repeat this process as time allows.

So what is new in this stage?

The meditator has become very aware of and sensitive to changes in the relative degree of intensity and vividness of perception of the meditation object.

The meditator has also become skilled in methods for restoring this perceptual acuity to its previous level when it has declined, and for achieving new levels of increased full-minded awareness.

And so how does one know when one has mastered this stage of the practice? This stage is an exception to the general rule that mastery of one stage is the prerequisite for mastery of the stage that follows. In fact, if one falls into the trap of subtle dullness, mastery of this stage might be skipped altogether. So as a standard then, when one is able to sustain something reasonably near to the greatest degree of full-minded awareness that they have experienced so far for most of their sit, then one can be said to have mastered this stage. The mastery is really in the ability to *sustain* full-minded awareness, not in having achieved any particular level of awareness that is a final objective. The degree of full-minded awareness will continue to improve in subsequent stages of practice, and one just continues to hold the intention that it will improve.

Noticeable benefits of practice: A heightened awareness outside of meditation, particularly in terms of one's own thoughts, words, actions and intentions in the present moment.

6. SUBDUING SUBTLE DISTRACTION

A. THE SITTING PRACTICE

In this practice we have progressed by stages. In the beginning, whenever we realized that the mind had wandered, we remembered that we intended to be observing the breath, and we brought the attention back to the breath until conscious awareness remained fixed on the sensation of the breath and could readily be restrained from roaming through other sensory fields, or to parts of body/tactile sensory field other than the specific location that has been chosen for observation of the breath.

After some time the mind no longer wandered, but we noticed that there is a lot more going on in the mind than just observing the breath. And even though we didn't noticeably lose attention to the breath, sometimes it was in the 'background' of our awareness while we are attending more closely to something else. It would have been useless at that stage to try to bring these other mind and

body distractions to an end, so instead we set as our goal to become aware whenever conscious awareness was being drawn towards something else, and then to sharpen our attention to the breath so that a shift in attention didn't occur. With practice, we have been able to reach a point where the mind does not wander; where other sensations, thoughts and feelings remain in the background of awareness and the attention does not waver (at least not easily or often) from the breath; where each in-breath and each out-breath is observed clearly enough to distinguish the changes that may occur from one breath to the next, and where dullness is held at bay.

But because there is a continued background awareness of bodily sensations and thoughts, there is still a scattering of attention to subtle distractions such as thoughts, images, memories, feelings, worries, etc as well as pains, pressures, itches and so forth. ***Exclusive focus*** or what could be called true ***single-pointedness of attention*** has not yet been achieved. The meditator is now ready to bring the focus of attention to a new level. This can be achieved by simply continuing to discipline the mind not to attend to this background awareness of physical sensations and mental activities until they eventually begin to fade, but this usually takes quite a long time. Another way to do this that is much quicker is by completely restricting conscious awareness to a single sensory field – the body tactile sense. The way by which this is accomplished is the continued utilization of the same practice of experiencing the body with the breath that was recommended for enhancing awareness in the discussion of the preceding stage.

Once again, I will present a conceptual model that will hopefully facilitate the understanding and application of what follows.

A model of the mind

Although we tend to use the word 'mind' as though we are referring to some single entity, the combination of distinctly different but interconnected processes that are encompassed by this term indicates that it is far more complex than that.

Upon reflection we can identify six distinct 'sensory fields' or 'cognitive domains', corresponding to the five physical senses and the 'mind sense'. The objects known by means of the five physical senses comprise the physical world around us and are familiar to us all. These objects are experienced as being *external* to the 'mind'. The objects known by means of the mind sense are the contents of the mind – memories; ideas and concepts and the words that symbolize them; thoughts, which are the manipulations of concepts and their interrelationships; mental images; and emotions.

The objects within each of these six sensory fields are sensed in a unique way by highly specific sense organs, and the information provided by each of these sense organs is then interpreted by a specific sensory system. Each sensory system involves a corresponding 'awareness' or 'mind' that not only processes the information, but often responds to that information as well. So 'Mind' can be

regarded as consisting of these six separate ‘minds’ functioning in combination with each other. These subsidiary minds may be referred to as the olfactory, gustatory, auditory, visual, body/ tactile and thinking/ feeling mind. The last two of these are obviously more complex than the other four, and also more dominantly present in conscious awareness. The body/ tactile sense includes a range of distinct sensory modalities including temperature, pressure, touch, vibration and pain as well as the sense of the position and location of body parts, extension in space, movement, rotation, balance, and position with respect to gravity. The term ‘feeling’ in the description ‘thinking/ feeling mind sense’ refers to the entire range of mental emotional states such as happiness, anger, affection, lust, sadness, joy, grief and so on. It *does not* refer to feelings of pleasure or pain, either physical or mental, nor of course to physical sensations of any kind. The ***qualities of pleasantness and unpleasantness*** are independently associated with particular sensory experiences within each of the five physical sensory domains, and likewise with the various contents and emotional states of the thinking/ feeling mind sense.

An interesting thing about these six separate ‘minds’ is that most of the time each of them functions ‘sub’-consciously. By sub-consciously I mean that we are not consciously aware of their activity except when attention is directed towards and takes as object of conscious awareness the content of one of these sensory fields. Another interesting point is that they all also function continuously, simultaneously, and often interactively.

Conscious awareness can be regarded as a separate entity, a seventh aspect of Mind that functions in a sort of ‘executive’ capacity. When this ‘executive mind’ attends to the contents of the sensory field of one of the six ‘sensory minds’, we have the ‘moments of consciousness’ that collectively constitute a period of being consciously aware of the object or objects of one of those fields. This is our normal experience of conscious awareness, and our ‘stream of consciousness’ consists of these consciousness events.

A familiar example of the functioning of these sensory minds is the visual sense and the visual mind operating while driving a car in traffic. The visual mind constantly moves the eyes through a programmed pattern of movements, checking mirrors looking at the vehicle immediately in front, then further ahead, then at the cars beside. Based on this visual information, the visual mind adjusts the pressure on the gas or brake or moves the foot from one pedal to the other, corrects the steering, etc and perhaps causes one hand to brush the hair away from the eyes to see better. All of this can occur at a non-conscious level while conscious awareness is attending to some thought process or other belonging to the sensory field of the thinking/feeling mind sense - remembering analyzing, planning, whatever. Unless something unusual occurs or something unexpected appears in the visual field (upon which event the visual mind immediately calls the attention of the executive mind to it) a person can successfully drive miles through city

traffic, completely oblivious to what is going on externally, and not even be able to recall any of it afterwards.

A parallel and simultaneous example to the one above involves the body/tactile sense with its own independently functioning but interacting mind, which senses acceleration and deceleration and responds by fine tuning the operation of the gas, brake, and steering. During the same period of time it will sense an irritation on the cheek and cause the hand to scratch it, detect some discomfort at the hips and shift the weight on the car seat to redistribute the pressure, and so on.

And even while conscious awareness is attending to the contents of the thinking/feeling mind, the thinking/feeling mind continues to operate at the sub-conscious level as well – when the thought process being attended to generates a strong emotional reaction, it will be unconsciously mirrored by a facial expression and perhaps a sigh. And then, seemingly out of nowhere, the thinking feeling mind will present to conscious awareness some completely unrelated thought, such as remembering that one intends to make a phone call later.

Each of these sensory minds, including the thinking/feeling mind of the ‘mind sense’ functions continuously in a non-conscious way and carries out programmed activities. These minds can *autonomously* perform only those actions that have been pre-programmed, either through inborn instinct or through previous intentional action of the executive mind. Every new skill that we learn through conscious application of effort, through trial and error and evaluation and correction, creates the operational programs for the sensory minds that will be able to perform these tasks more or less independently in the future.

The thinking/feeling mind functions in much the same way that the visual mind or any of these other sensory minds do, just with a different field of objects and a far more complex set of programs, constantly sorting through the mental contents, solving problems at a subconscious level, calling the attention of the executive mind to things we are supposed to do, like pick up the mail, etc.

Whatever the ‘executive mind’ attends to, on the other hand, involves conscious awareness. Through conscious intention the executive mind is also capable of novel action. It actually creates the programming for each of these other minds, such as when we learn to drive or play a piece of music, and it can override the programming of any of the six subsidiary minds.

At any given moment while a person is actually ‘conscious’, the executive mind is attending to and taking as object of consciousness something within one or another of these six sensory fields. *There is no consciousness without an object of consciousness, and these are the only objects normally available to the executive mind.*

If one observes the normal, ordinary behavior of the mind and consciousness, it is apparent that conscious awareness tends to be constantly shifting from one sensory field to another, always looking for something of interest or importance to attend to, and dwelling there for a while whenever an object of interest is found. And each of the six sensory minds is capable of calling conscious awareness into attendance if something arises in that sensory field that is of unusual interest or importance.

This constant movement of the mind is the antithesis of single-pointedness. In its coarsest form it is responsible for distraction, for mind-wandering, for forgetting of the meditation object, and for coarse scattering of attention. In its more subtle form it is responsible for the experience of the mind attending to other things even while focusing on the meditation object.

Using the model of Mind described above, we can describe the ordinary behaviour of the Mind as follows: Conscious awareness, that which we have designated as a sort of 'executive mind', normally moves through all six sensory domains scanning for whatever seems to be important or interesting. In the first part of the training, stages 1 through 4, we disciplined conscious awareness to greatly decrease this constant scanning and searching activity. A second ordinary behaviour of the mind is that whenever one of the six autonomously functioning 'sensory minds' has content that it independently evaluates as important, it presents this information to the 'executive mind', which usually responds by attending to that information. In stages 4 through 6 we are training the executive mind not to respond so readily to the content presented by the sensory minds. Beginning in stage 6 and continuing through stage 8, as a sort of natural result of not being responded to, the sensory minds, including the thinking/ feeling mind, become less and less active, or, as we might say, become *pacified*. Thus there comes about a great stability of attention of conscious awareness to an intentionally chosen object.

The method for achieving exclusive focus of attention

Now, when one sits in meditation on the breath, the eyes are either closed, or if open are fixed and unfocused, so there is little or no content in that sensory field. The location selected for meditation is usually a quiet one, and whatever noises remain are familiar and unobtrusive, so there are minimal objects of interest in that sensory field. The lips are closed, the teeth are slightly open, and the tongue is behind the upper teeth against the roof of the mouth, so there is essentially no activity in the gustatory sensory field, and unless one is meditating next to a kitchen or some such, the same is true of the olfactory sense. This leaves two sensory fields with a lot of content and activity – the body/tactile sense with its bodily sensations, and the mind sense with its thoughts. (For the sake of brevity, we will include memories, mental images and emotions within the term 'thoughts'.) Of these two, thoughts are the most difficult to 'turn off' so an effective strategy for the next step in the training is to focus on subduing thoughts in particular. By completely restricting conscious awareness to a single sensory

field – the body tactile sense – one can calm the constant activity of the thinking/feeling mind and bring about a greater degree of single-pointedness of attention.

This is accomplished using the same technique of '*experiencing the body with the breath*' that was described earlier and that we have already used to increase the intensity of full-minded awareness. The process of thoroughly exploring the body/tactile field, which happens to be the same sensory modality as the meditation object (sensation of the breath), *while also holding an awareness of the sensation breath*, can so completely engage conscious awareness in that single sensory field that conscious awareness ceases to attend to the thinking/feeling mind at all. When the attention is returned once again to the sensation of the breath at the tip of the nose, the meditator will experience a period of exclusive focus on that one isolated set of sensations to the exclusion of all else. There are no longer any thoughts in the periphery of the awareness, nor is there an awareness of any other sensations, bodily, auditory, etc. When this single-pointedness of attention degrades, the exercise can be repeated. Over time the duration of the period in which this exclusive focus can be maintained becomes longer and longer.

At this point in the training, two important processes are now converging. 1) The training of mind has been such that conscious awareness has ceased to attend in a significant way to the content presented by the thinking/feeling mind. In other words, when we trained ourselves not to allow subtle distractions to become gross distractions, we had trained conscious awareness not to be *drawn towards* the content presented by the thinking/feeling mind, even though the thinking/feeling mind continued to present such content. Now, 2) the thinking feeling mind is itself becoming pacified, its level of activity diminishes, and so it no longer quite so continuously or so vigorously presents potential distractions to conscious awareness.

The meditator might well have already noticed, but if not should take some time to do so now, that when the thinking/ feeling mind presents some thought to awareness but that thought is ignored, it quickly fades and disappears. On the other hand, when the thought is attended to, that attending gives it energy to continue and be further elaborated upon. When the awareness is so fully engaged with the sensations of the body, and the process of searching for sensations that change with the breath, that there is no awareness of other thoughts, those thoughts simply lose their energy and fade without ever rising above the sub-conscious level, and then the overall activity of the thinking/ feeling mind is greatly diminished.

As an analogy, conscious awareness may be compared to a parent engaged in a specific task, while the six sensory minds may be compared to children used to being able to command the parent's attention at any time. If the parent continues to ignore the children's calls for attention, after a while they will do so less and

less often. They will still call for attention from time to time, but so long as they are firmly dismissed, the attempted interruptions will be infrequent. However, if at any point they are no longer ignored and dismissed, they will once again begin to clamor to be noticed. In the same way, the subtle distractions of thoughts and sensations will be subdued through depriving them of attentional energy.

So in summary, the objective of the training in this stage is to have conscious awareness restricted to a single sensory field while the activity of the other 'minds' undergoes a natural process of pacification.

Following the return of the attention to the sensation of the breath at the tip of the nose after completing the 'experiencing the body with the breath' practice, the mind is found to be much more still and focused. *At least for a short while*, thoughts and feelings will have pretty well ceased to arise in the mind. The occasional thought or bodily sensation from other than the area of focused attention will briefly enter into awareness, but will neither draw the attention nor will it persist. The first of several degrees or stages of exclusive focus or single-pointedness has finally been achieved when this non-distractibility can be maintained. But when one first achieves this exclusive focus, it requires constant effort and vigilance to maintain, and it can be easily lost if there is any slackening of introspective awareness or failure to make a necessary correction.

A shift in perception of the meditation object

When one begins to meditate on the breath at the nose, there is a noticing of the in-breath and the out-breath. The meditator's perception is permeated with the concepts that she is a discrete being with a body, and that there is a nose as a part of the body, and that it is surrounded by a substance called air, and that this substance can be caused to move through the nose, and that this movement is bi-directional and is known as breath. There is actually only minimal awareness of the actual sensation that is occurring - just enough to trigger these concepts emergence into conscious awareness. The attention immediately moves from the sensation itself to that mass of conceptual formations that has been constructed from birth to account for sensory experiences like this, and what is known to conscious awareness is not the sensation, but these mental constructs. In order to sustain the attention on the breath, the meditator engaged with the breath by noticing the beginning, middle, end of the in-breath, the pause, the beginning, middle, end of the out-breath, the next pause, etc. All of these are concepts as well. Not only are they concepts, they are all complex concepts constructed out of simpler concepts.

For example, conscious awareness takes as object the sensation from the body tactile sense as the air *first strikes* the skin at the nostrils. Then conscious awareness shifts to the mind sense and *perceives* that sensation, *knows it* in its **conceptual** form which actually consists of a combination of other concepts of nose, touch, air, beginning, in-breath and so forth. Then conscious awareness returns to the body tactile sense and takes as object the sensation produced by the

ongoing flow of air past the skin at the nostrils, immediately following which it goes back again to the mind sense to **know** that sensation in a similar way as ‘first-part-of-the-middle-of-the-in-breath’ or some such.

This is the initial appearance of the breath, no more than a refined version of the ordinary non-meditative perception of the breath. This appearance of the breath continues to predominate until the present stage of the practice.

Now, having completed the exploration of the body, and in the process having also pacified to some degree the thinking/feeling mind that is the repository and workshop of these concepts, then one returns to the sensations of the breath at the tip of the nose and experiences them as a *purely sensory phenomenon free of conceptualization*. At this crucial, culminating step the focus of concentration is very restricted, involving observation of sensation in very small area of the body, and doing so without conceptualization. The experience should be of:

1. a sensation arising and passing away
2. a brief interval of no sensation
3. a different sensation arising and passing away
4. another brief interval of no sensation
5. the first sensation again arising and passing away

And so it repeats. There is no concept of breath or of in-breaths or out-breaths, or air or nose or movement or direction, just two sensations arising and passing away in alternation. So it is a clearly defined and very restricted field of observation, and it constitutes the single-pointedness that will continue to develop into the concentration of the adept.

What has happened is that, through habituation, all of that conceptual noticing is no longer necessary to keep the attention engaged, and all of that conceptual thought is also just a distraction from the simple observation of the sensations produced by the breath. Now the mind follows these sensations naturally, and so awareness of the sensation (which is in truth the only thing that was ever present other than conceptual formations anyway) begins to predominate.

Although the meditation object is still the breath, it is now the **sensation** of the breath in a very real sense, *relatively* free of conceptual formations, and this marks an important change in the appearance of the object. This important change in appearance of the meditation object is distinctive enough that it seems to deserve a label of its own, and since it has been acquired as a result of all the practice that has gone before, the label **acquired appearance** seems very appropriate.

[What follows in the next paragraph will not necessarily occur unless the meditator has overcome subtle dullness through cultivating intensity and clarity of full-minded introspective awareness.]

As the meditator becomes more and more skilled at single-pointedly observing just the sensation, more subtle bits of conceptual baggage drop away as well. At some point she may suddenly become aware that she no longer knows which of the two patterns of sensation that arise and pass away in alternation is the one from the in-breath and which is from the out-breath. She is also aware that she *could* know in an instant, ***but that a distinct and separate shift of the attention away from the sensation to the conceptual formations of the mind would be necessary.*** At another time she may suddenly realize that the apparent location in space of the sensations no longer coincides with where her nose should be, that it is off to one side or above or below. She knows that all she needs to do is to turn conscious awareness to the body shape and position, and then the two will immediately coincide, but once again, it will involve a separate attentional shift. The product of this awareness is a profound insight into the relationship between sensory experience and the contents of the mind.

B. THE NON-SITTING PRACTICE

Walking meditation

Continue the walking practice as you have done so far. Walk slowly with your attention focused primarily on the sensations associated with walking, intentionally redirecting your attention to other phenomena whenever you are inclined to do so, but remaining entirely in the present moment. If you continue to walk as you redirect your attention to something else, maintain an awareness of the sensations of walking in the periphery of your awareness. Investigate your experience, and cultivate a sense of joy and enjoyment.

Here is another exercise you can incorporate into your walking practice: Take up once again the practice of walking very slowly while closely following the sensations associated with each part of the stepping cycle. When your mind is well settled and your attention stable, stop and redirecting your attention to the auditory field. Listen to whatever ambient sounds there are and distinguish between the hearing of the sound and the identification of the sound. Notice how immediate the process of identification is, almost instantaneous, but that there are some sounds that are more in the nature of ‘noise’ and don’t result in such immediate identification. Notice that whenever sounds are identified, there is a subtle processing by the mind in terms of source, direction, and especially mental constructs about external reality that arise through inference and deduction. Beginning with noise and then progressing to more readily identifiable sounds, practice hearing the sound itself without the identification and processing. See how well you can just ‘be with’ the sounds without interpreting them. Embark on a process of discovery of the relationship between the sensory form itself, the ‘sound’ that is derived from contact of the external stimulus with the sense organ and which constitutes the actual experience, and the mind with its labels and constructs and inferences.

This exercise can also be done with the body/ tactile sensations, distinguishing between the actual sensation and the interpretation of it. Explore the inner sense of the body as extended in space and the awareness of the position and location of the various parts of the body, in this way. Resume walking, and explore the sense of movement and the changing position and location of the parts of the body.

Full-minded awareness of daily activities

Continue to practice full-minded awareness of daily activities. As often as you can remember to do so, be aware of what of what your body is doing in the present moment, and also of the bodily sensations that are present.

Mindful awareness of the breath

Continue to practice mindful awareness of the breath for a few moments at a time, whenever the opportunity presents itself, and before sleeping. Generate the intention to follow the breath right into the sleep state.

Begin to observe the breath immediately upon waking as well. Generate the intention to become aware of the breath as soon as one awakes. Within those first few minutes, practice bringing the mind to a state of full-minded awareness. If there is the leisure to do so, scan the body in the same manner as in the practice of experiencing the body with the breath.

Summary

The instruction for this stage is as follows: Follow the sensation of the breath as before until your focus of attention and level of awareness have stabilized. Shift the awareness to the surface of the abdomen, and then practice experiencing the body with the breath to the exclusion of all other thoughts and sensations. Return the attention to the sensation at the tip of the nose, and practice sustaining the resulting single-pointedness of attention. When subtle distractions begin to intrude again, repeat the process until exclusive focus on the meditation object can be continuously maintained.

So what has been accomplished in this stage is that:

The relative activity of the body/tactile mind and the thinking/feeling mind has decreased to a level similar to that of the visual and auditory minds. Please note that the sense organs themselves are fully functional, the sensory minds are fully functional and will respond to external stimuli impacting the sense organs, but the intrinsic activity level of the sensory minds themselves is reduced significantly. Experientially this means that distracting thoughts, emotions, and sensations are few, fleeting, and weak.

The *scope* of the meditator's field of observation can be expanded and contracted at will *without losing the quality of exclusive focus*.

The perception of the meditation object has undergone a profound shift in that it is now largely non-conceptual, consisting primarily of the phenomenon of pure sensation.

The sixth stage has been mastered and subtle distraction has been subdued when, following an initial period of stabilization in each meditation session that corresponds to a progression through the meditative states corresponding to stages 4, 5 and 6, there is a virtual, although not total, absence of subtle distraction. The awareness of thoughts, ambient sounds, bodily sensations, and internal mental states, is only *intermittently* present in conscious awareness, and without the power to draw the attention away from the meditation object, although vigilance is still required to prevent subtle dullness and subtle distraction from arising again. The meditator entered into the 7th stage and has completed the development of Skilled Concentration.

Noticeable benefits of practice: Powerful concentration and awareness that can be readily directed towards any task.