



WISDOM ACADEMY

Shamatha:
Meditation for Balanced Living

B. ALAN WALLACE

Lesson 5:
Sati and Bhavanga in the Practice of Shamatha

Reading:
The Attention Revolution
“Resurgent Attention” and “Close Attention”
Pages 43–73

The
**Attention
Revolution**



UNLOCKING
THE POWER OF
THE FOCUSED MIND

B. ALAN WALLACE, PH.D.

foreword by Daniel Goleman



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STAGE 3: RESURGENT ATTENTION ●●●

When you reach the third stage, *resurgent attention*, during each practice session your attention is fixed most of the time upon your meditative object. By now, you will have increased the duration of each session beyond the initial twenty-four minutes to perhaps twice that. As your attention gradually stabilizes, you may increase the duration of each session by increments of three minutes. At all times, though, value the *quality* of your meditation over the *quantity* of time spent in each session. If you sit for long periods but let your mind rove around unnoticed among distractions or fall into dullness, not only are you wasting your time, but also you are developing bad habits that will only get harder and harder to break.

When you were still on the second stage, although you experienced periods when your attention was continually engaged with the meditative object for as long as a minute, most of the time you were still caught up in distractions. When you reach the third stage, your attentional stability has increased so that most of the time you remain engaged with the object. Occasionally there are still lapses when you completely forget the object, but you quickly recognize them and patch up these holes in the continuity of attention. Long before you achieve this stage, you may occasionally have a session in which your mind seems to remain on the object most of the time. But don't be fooled! Even amateur golfers occasionally hit a birdie, but that doesn't mean they're ready to go on the pro circuit. The third stage is achieved only when your mind remains focused on the object most of the time in virtually all your sessions. For most people, the primary problem in

this phase of practice is still coarse excitation, and it is with the power of mindfulness that you accomplish this third stage.

From the beginning of shamatha training, however, some people are more prone to laxity, which manifests in coarse, medium, and subtle degrees. For the moment, we'll concern ourselves only with *coarse laxity*, which occurs when your attention mostly disengages from the object and sinks into a spaced-out vacancy. This is like having the reception of a radio station mostly fade out, even without interference from another channel. Abiding in a state of coarse laxity can be very peaceful, with your mind relatively undisturbed by thoughts or emotional upheavals. But if you spend many hours each day in such a state of dullness, Tibetan contemplatives report that this not only has no benefit, it can actually impair your intelligence. The acuity of your mind starts to atrophy, and over the long term, this can do serious damage. During the early 1970s, I knew of one fellow who decided on his own that the whole point of meditation was to stop thinking, and he diligently applied himself to this goal for days on end. Eventually, he reached this goal by becoming vegetative, unable even to feed himself, and he needed to be hospitalized. This might be deemed an extreme case of coarse laxity!

As you continue in this practice, in order to progress through the stages of attentional development, you need to hone the ability to monitor the quality of your attention. While the main force of your awareness is directed to the meditation object with *mindfulness*, this needs to be supported with the faculty of *introspection*, which allows for the quality control of attention, enabling you to swiftly note when the mind has fallen into either excitation or laxity. As soon as you detect either imbalance, take the necessary steps to remedy it. Your first antidote to excitation is to relax more deeply; to counteract laxity, arouse your attention.

Throughout all the first three stages, involuntary thoughts flow like a cascading waterfall. But over time, these currents of compulsive ideation carry you away less and less frequently. Coarse excitation gradually subsides, even though thoughts and mental images continue to crop up, as do sounds, smells, and other sensory appearances. Don't try to block out these distractions. Simply let them go and refocus your attention as single-pointedly as you can on your chosen object of meditation.

Many people appear to achieve the second stage while meditating just one or two sessions each day. In their more focused sessions, they experience periods of continuity of attention, but such stability is lost during the day as they engage in other activities. Shamatha meditation can be very helpful even in the midst of a normal, socially active way of life, especially when it is balanced with other kinds of spiritual practice, such as the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion. Rounded, integrated practice is like maintaining a healthy diet. While a proper diet won't necessarily heal imbalance and illness, it is still indispensable for maintaining your vitality and resistance to disease. Likewise, a balanced meditative practice in the course of a socially engaged way of life heightens your psychological immune system, so that you are less vulnerable to mental imbalances of all kinds.

If you are practicing for only a session or two each day, you may not progress beyond the second attentional stage. The reason for this is simple: if you are balancing your attention for an hour or so each day, but letting it become fragmented and distracted for the other fifteen hours of waking time each day, then the attentional coherence cultivated during these brief sessions is overwhelmed by the distractions of the rest of the day. The achievement of the stage of resurgent attention requires a greater commitment to practice. This will entail multiple sessions of meditation each day, practiced within a quiet, contemplative way of life that supports the cultivation of inner calm and collectedness. The key to success is to conduct your life between sessions in such a way that you don't lose the ground you have gained.

THE PRACTICE:

MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING WITH VIVIDNESS

Begin this twenty-four-minute session, as always, by settling your body in its rest state, imbued with the three qualities of relaxation, stillness, and vigilance. Take three slow, deep breaths, breathing down into the abdomen and then into the chest. Let your awareness permeate your body, feeling the sensations of the respiration wherever they arise. Then let your breath flow of its own accord, settling into its natural rhythm.

Mentally, the initial emphasis in shamatha practice is on relaxation, which can be induced by attending to the sensations of breathing throughout the body. The second emphasis is on stability of attention, and for this it can be helpful to observe the sensations of breathing in the region of the belly. Then, having established a foundation of relaxation and stability, we shift the emphasis to cultivating vividness of attention. It is crucially important that stability is not gained at the expense of relaxation, and that the increase of vividness does not coincide with the decrease of stability. The relationship among these three qualities can be likened to the roots, trunk, and foliage of a tree. As your practice grows, the roots of relaxation go deeper, the trunk of stability gets stronger, and the foliage of vividness reaches higher.

In this practice session, shift the emphasis to vividness. You do this by elevating the focus of attention and directing it to a subtler object. Direct your attention to the tactile sensations of your breath at the apertures of your nostrils or above your upper lip, wherever you feel the in- and out-flow of your breath. Elevating the focus of attention helps to induce vividness, and attending to a subtle object enhances that further. Observe these sensations at the gateway of the respiration, even between breaths. There is an ongoing flow of tactile sensations in the area of the nostrils and upper lip, so sustain your attention there as continuously as possible. If the breath becomes so subtle that you can't detect the sensations of its flow, quiet your mind and observe more carefully. As you arouse the vividness of attention, eventually the sensations of the breath will become evident again.

On the periphery of your awareness, you may still note other sensations throughout your body, as well as sounds and so on. Just let them be, without trying to block them out, and focus your attention single-pointedly on the sensations around the apertures of your nostrils.

Count your breaths if you find this helpful. Arouse your faculty of introspection so that you quickly note whether excitation or laxity has arisen, and take the necessary steps to balance the attention when such problems occur. Continue practicing for one twenty-four-minute period, then bring the session to a close.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PRACTICE

The Buddha described the practice of mindfulness of breathing with the following analogy:

Just as in the last month of the hot season, when a mass of dust and dirt has swirled up, a great rain cloud out of season disperses it and quells it on the spot, so too concentration by mindfulness of breathing, when developed and cultivated, is peaceful and sublime, an ambrosial dwelling, and it disperses and quells on the spot unwholesome states whenever they arise.¹⁹

This analogy refers to the healing effect of balanced attention. When awareness is brought to rest on a neutral object, such as the breath, immediately every distressing thought disappears, and the mind becomes peaceful, sublime, and happy. These qualities do not arise from the object of awareness—the breath—but from the nature of the mind in a state of balance. This approach to healing the mind is similar to healing the physical body. The Buddha implied in his rain cloud analogy that the mind, like the body, has an innate power to heal itself. By clearly attending to a neutral object with sustained attention, without craving or aversion, we enable the mind to begin its own healing.

Since coarse excitation is still the predominant problem during the third stage of attentional development, you may find it helpful to continue counting the breaths. Some Theravada teachers, following the fifth-century scholar Buddhaghosa, offer two methods involving “quick counting.” In the first of these techniques, you count from one to ten with each full respiration. In the second, with each full breath cycle you count, “one, two, three, four, five; one, two, three, four, five, six; one, two, three, four, five, six, seven; ...eight; ...nine; ...ten.”²⁰ Asanga, on the other hand, suggested counting the breaths backward, from ten to one. After that, you may try counting two breaths as one, four as one, and so on, slowing the pace of counting to include ever larger clusters of breaths. However you choose to count the breaths, when your attention stabilizes to such an extent that you no longer

experience lapses of attention but remain continuously engaged with each inhalation and exhalation, you can stop counting. That temporary crutch has served its purpose. Asanga commented, though, that the various methods for counting the breaths are not for everyone. They may help some people to counteract laxity and excitation, but others may find that they can focus their attention quite effectively on the respiration without counting. Such people don't need to bother with any of the above counting techniques.

As your mind calms, you may find that your respiration becomes subtler, and this results in fainter sensations of breathing. The further you progress in this practice, the subtler the breath becomes. At times it may become so subtle that you can't detect it at all. This challenges you to enhance the vividness of attention. In other words, you have to pay closer and closer attention to these sensations in order to stay mentally engaged with the breath.²¹ There's a kind of biofeedback process at work here. If your mind becomes distracted and you get caught up in involuntary thoughts, your breathing will become coarser, resulting in stronger sensations, which are easier to detect. But as your mind calms down again, the breathing and the sensations that go with it become finer, and this once again challenges you to heighten the degree of vividness. Mindfulness of breathing has this unique "biofeedback" advantage.

Various physical sensations may occur in meditation. Sometimes you may feel that your limbs are extremely heavy or thick. Sometimes your body may feel very large. Or you may feel that you are floating or levitating. Other sensations such as tingling, vibration, or heat are common. You may experience telescopic vision, viewing your body as if from a distance. Especially when you meditate many hours a day, you may experience within your body *prana*, or vital energies, shifting and releasing pockets of tension. When you engage in mindfulness of breathing, these energies begin to balance and flow naturally. This is a process that takes time, and while the energies redistribute themselves, their movement produces various sensations. Don't be worried about them or make a big deal of them; these are natural consequences of the practice.

The practice of shamatha results in an anomalous kind of attention. Normally, when the mind is relaxed, attention is slack, and when attention is

aroused, this brings with it a state of tension, a tightening of the body and mind. But in this practice, the more you arouse your attention, the more deeply the mind relaxes. There's a relatively egoless quality to shamatha; while other activities that call for a high level of concentration are effortful and often goal oriented, shamatha entails doing almost nothing. You're passively attending to the sensations of the breath without regulating it in any way. Your ego is mostly taken out of commission as you let the body breathe of its own accord, exerting only a subtle degree of effort to balance attention when it falls into laxity or excitation.

As you advance in the practice, increase the duration of each meditation session and decrease the number of sessions each day. Always go for quality over quantity.

Unbroken continuity of practice is vital. Imagine starting a fire by rubbing two sticks together: if you rub the sticks together for only a few moments, then rest, then do it for a few moments, then rest, you could continue in this way for years without even igniting a spark. Likewise, if you are intent on progressing through all the nine stages, the time-tested way to proceed is to radically simplify your life, withdraw temporarily into solitude, and devote yourself full-time to this practice for extended periods. It is not easy to achieve the bliss of shamatha without leaving heavily populated areas, which tend to be noisy and congested. In contrast, in the wilderness, removed from society, a meditator can more easily set his mind at ease and accomplish meditative stabilization.

AN ATTENTIVE WAY OF LIFE

The major challenge at this stage of the practice is to adopt a lifestyle that supports the cultivation of attentional balance, rather than eroding it between sessions. To achieve stage three, the dedicated meditator will need to take up this practice as a serious avocation, spending days or weeks in this practice in the midst of a contemplative way of life in a serene, quiet environment. If we practice only a session or two each day while leading an active life, we may occasionally feel that we've reached the sustained attention of the third stage, but we'll have a hard time stabilizing at that

level. The busy-ness of the day intrudes, the mind becomes scattered, and the attentional coherence gained during meditation will likely be lost.

The modern world constantly reminds us that we are “social creatures” and provides little incentive or encouragement to spend long periods in solitude. Many people even think that extended solitary meditation is anti-social, or is a behavior associated with mental deviants rather than with people striving to achieve exceptional mental balance. Solitude and seclusion are associated for many with boredom, loneliness, fear, and depression. It’s no wonder that penal systems around the world use solitary confinement to punish unruly prisoners. But why do people so often find solitude and inactivity distressing? In the absence of distractions, we come face to face with our own minds, and if they are seriously imbalanced, we relentlessly experience the symptoms of these mental afflictions with no buffer zone, no distractions, and no escape.

While the value of solitude is often lost on the public today, there have always been proponents of simplicity of lifestyle so that we can devote ourselves to quiet contemplation. Henry David Thoreau explained why he withdrew into solitude by Walden Pond: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”²² Solitary meditation doesn’t *cause* mental imbalances, but *uncovers* them. Boredom may set in, especially when the mind succumbs to laxity, and restlessness often comes in the wake of excitation. With perseverance you can move beyond these imbalances and begin to discover the well-being that arises from a balanced mind. But this requires courage to face your own inner demons and persist in the practice despite the emotional upheavals that are bound to occur in the course of this training.

PREPARING FOR AN EXPEDITION

When I lead shamatha seminars, I like to think of them as “expeditions” rather than “retreats.” The word “retreat” has the connotation not only of withdrawal but also of defeat, and that certainly isn’t the spirit of such practice. The word “expedition,” on the other hand, suggests adventure,

conquest, and exploration. The Latin roots of the word have to do with extricating yourself, literally “stepping out,” of some situation in which you’ve gotten stuck. In the practice of shamatha, we discover how deeply our minds are trapped in the twin ruts of excitation and laxity. In the Buddhist tradition, a mind trapped in these ruts is said to be dysfunctional, and in order to make it serviceable, it is helpful to step out of our normal activities, seek out a spacious sense of solitude, and explore the frontiers of the mind.

This expedition doesn’t require blind faith or allegiance to any religious creed or metaphysical belief system. Over the past three millennia, contemplatives from various Asian cultures, with diverse belief systems, have followed the path of shamatha to its culmination, and they have reported their findings. We don’t need to accept their claims simply on their own authority, but if we are inspired by earlier accounts of the benefits of this practice, we may venture forth on this path to see for ourselves whether we can achieve the results of the contemplative explorers who have preceded us.

There are great adventures ahead, but also perils and dead ends. Sometimes the path is clear, but now and then it may seem to disappear altogether. The purpose of relying on those who know this path from their own experience is to save time.

Six prerequisites for sustained, rigorous training are set forth in many Indian and Tibetan Buddhist meditation manuals.²³ These are some of the essential causes and conditions that will produce the fruit of shamatha.

1. A Supportive Environment

It’s important to practice in a safe, quiet, and agreeable location, optimally with a few other like-minded people. This should be a place where food, clothing, and other necessities are easily obtained. Finding such an environment sounds simple in principle, but in practice it can be very difficult, especially if you try to devote yourself to practice for months on end.

I discovered this through my own experience back in 1980. I’d moved into a cabin in India to engage in solitary meditation. From the outside, the site looked idyllic. Perched on a rocky mountain ledge in northern India, it overlooked the verdant Kangra Valley to the south and the ram-parts of the Himalayas to the north.

It was a blessing to live there, but I also had to deal with legions of bedbugs who invaded my sleeping bag every night and even crept into my robes to drink my blood during the day while I sat in meditation. Even if I caught them, as a Buddhist monk I wouldn't kill them. Every morning, around two o'clock, I would wake up with my skin marked with welts that itched like a hundred mosquito bites. I would collect the critters in a metallic mug from which they couldn't escape, and in the morning I would throw the night's catch over the side of the mountain. They would then climb back up and prepare for the next night's invasion. This went on for two months before I discovered that I could keep them out of my sleeping bag by laying it on a raised platform with each of its legs inserted inside a can filled with water. Though I succeeded in warding off the bedbug invasions, I still had to deal with the fleas, mosquitoes, and rats, as well as the penetrating mildew that set in shortly after the monsoon began.

After four years of meditation, two in Asia and two in North America, I concluded that—unless you're wealthy and can simply purchase a place to meditate in quiet for months or years on end—a suitable environment is hard to come by. Nevertheless, it's necessary to create such places if people in the modern world wish to progress very far along the path of shamatha.

2 & 3. Having Few Desires and Being Content

The first of these two prerequisites refers to having few desires for things you *don't* have, and the second refers to being content with what you *do* have. Without these two qualities, your mind will never settle down in the practice. You will be constantly thinking of things you want but don't have, and you will fret that your present circumstances are inadequate in one way or another. This does not mean that you must quell your desire for happiness, but it is necessary to refocus your aspirations on transforming your own mind as the means to genuine well-being. And for this to happen, you must see the limitations of a life driven by such mundane pursuits as wealth, luxury, entertainment, and reputation. All these circumstances can give you a temporary spurt of pleasure that tapers off as soon as the pleasurable stimulus stops. Mental balance is the gateway to finding genuine happiness, and shamatha is the key that opens that gate.

The Buddha illustrated this point with the story of an elephant that entered a shallow pond to refresh itself on a hot summer day.²⁴ Given its great size, the elephant could find a footing in the deep water and enjoy itself. Then a cat came along and, wishing to escape the heat of the day, jumped into the same pond. But unlike the elephant, the cat couldn't find any footing, so it had only two options: either to sink to the bottom or float to the top. Similarly, those who have accustomed themselves to having few desires and contentment can find joy in solitude, whereas those who have not found such equilibrium are bound either to sink into laxity and depression or to float up into excitation and restlessness.

4. Having Few Activities

While you are devoting yourself to shamatha training, it is important to keep other activities to a minimum, for if your behavior between meditation sessions erodes the coherence of attention that you gained during sessions, then you won't be able to gain any ground. Given the fast pace of modern life and the general emphasis on keeping busy, it can be difficult to make this shift to simplicity. Our work can be a kind of narcotic, concealing the unrest and turbulence of our minds. And a lifestyle that alternates between hard work and hard play can keep us constantly busy, without ever gaining a clue about the meaning of life or the potentials of human consciousness.

5. Ethical Discipline

A necessary foundation for balancing the mind is ethical discipline, which is far more than merely following social rules or religious commandments from an external source of authority. To live harmoniously with others, we need to practice social ethics, and to live harmoniously within our natural environment, we need to practice environmental ethics. The practice of ethics involves avoiding harm to others by means of our physical, verbal, or mental behavior, and leads to social and environmental flourishing, in which whole communities may live in harmony with each other and with their natural environment.²⁵

A third type of ethical discipline is psychophysical ethics. To promote inner well-being, we need to practice ethical ways of treating our own

bodies and minds. This includes taking good care of the body, following a healthy diet, and getting the right kind and amount of physical exercise. It also involves engaging in mental behavior that is conducive to balancing the mind and reducing disturbing mental states such as hatred, greed, confusion, fear, and jealousy.

The call to ethical discipline challenges each of us to examine our own behavior carefully, noting both short-term and long-term consequences of our actions. Although an activity may yield immediate pleasure, if over time it results in unrest, conflict, and misery, it warrants the label "unwholesome." On the other hand, while a behavior may involve difficulties in the short-term, we can regard it as "wholesome" if it eventually leads to contentment, harmony, and genuine happiness for ourselves and others.

Environmental, social, and psychophysical ethics all involve living in ways that are conducive to our own and others' well-being. An ethical way of life supports the cultivation of mental balance, and this in turn further enables us to promote our own and others' well-being.

6. Dispensing with Compulsive Thoughts

Many of us let compulsive thoughts dominate our minds. These won't stop overnight, but as we engage in shamatha practice, both during and between sessions, it is important to observe the mind's activities and restrain it when it falls into thought patterns that aggravate mental disturbances. Otherwise, we'll be like the cat that thrashes around on the surface of the pond, never free from the turbulence of our own minds.

The Indian Buddhist sage Atisha wrote of the importance of these prerequisites:²⁶

As long as the prerequisites for shamatha
Are incomplete, meditative stabilization
Will not be accomplished, even if you meditate
Strenuously for thousands of years.

In our material society, even for people who are drawn to nonmaterialistic values, there's a strong tendency to take our current way of life as the

norm, and then to add meditation to fix it, like a Band-Aid applied to a festering wound. My first experience with meditation in the late 1960s is a good example. I went to a teacher who gave me a mantra and told me how to meditate on it, but in these instructions there was no reference to the way I should lead the rest of my life. Even now, decades later, meditation is often taught with little or no reference to any of the above prerequisites. It has been reduced to a kind of first aid to alleviate the symptoms of a dysfunctional life, with all its anxieties, depression, frustration, and emotional vacillations. For a mind that is assaulted with a myriad of mental afflictions such as craving, hostility, and delusion, we need more than a medic. We need long-term, intensive care. That's what this training is all about.



INTERLUDE EMPATHETIC JOY

When you enter a long meditation retreat, you may first experience a sense of relief to be away from your normal way of life, with all its demands and concerns. But after this “honeymoon” phase of the retreat is over, the hard work of training the mind begins. The lifestyle itself while in retreat can be quite a challenge. While living in society, you can easily take your mind off your mind by losing yourself in work, entertainment, conversation, and many other kinds of busy-ness. But in the simple, uncluttered lifestyle of a contemplative, you are removed from external sources of distraction, and the physical and mental reactions to this can be intense.

We are addicted to pleasurable stimuli, and when we devote ourselves many hours each day to shamatha training, with few distractions between sessions, we begin to have withdrawal symptoms. The mind oscillates between boredom and restlessness, and at times it may descend into depression and self-doubt. At such times, we tend to fixate on ideas and memories that reinforce such gloom and doom, so it’s important to lift ourselves out of these emotional sinkholes by reflecting on other aspects of reality that inspire us. One such practice is the meditative cultivation of empathetic joy.

In the practice of loving-kindness and compassion, we cultivate a yearning that others may find happiness and its causes and be free from suffering and its causes. The cultivation of the empathetic joy involves attending closely to something that is already a reality—the joys, successes, and virtues of yourself and others. Empathy is *feeling with others*, and in this practice we focus not on their sorrows and difficulties, but on their happiness

and triumphs. This practice is a direct antidote to feelings of depression, anxiety, and hopelessness that may arise in the course of intensive, sustained meditation, or simply in the course of daily living.

MEDITATION ON EMPATHETIC JOY

Find a comfortable position, keeping the spine straight. Settle your body in its rest state, imbued with the three qualities of relaxation, stillness, and vigilance. Bring to mind a person you know well who exudes a sense of good cheer and well-being. Think of this person's physical presence, words, and actions. As you attend to this person's joy, open your heart to that joy and take delight in it. This will be easy if you already feel close to this person.

Now, bring to mind another individual. Think of someone for whom something wonderful has happened, recently or in the past. Recall the delight of this person and share in the joy.

Now direct your attention to someone who inspires you with his or her virtues, such as generosity, kindness, and wisdom. Rejoice in these virtues for this person's sake, for your own sake, and for all those who are recipients of this virtue.

Now direct awareness to your own life. Empathetic joy in our own virtues is important yet often overlooked. Attend to periods in your life that have been a source of inspiration to you and perhaps to others as well. Think of occasions when you embodied your own ideals. Attend to and take delight in your own virtues. There doesn't need to be any pompousness here, or any sense of pride or arrogance. As you recall the people and circumstances that enabled you to live well and enjoy the sweet fruits of your efforts, you may simultaneously experience a deep sense of gratitude and joy. This prevents you from slipping into a superficial sense of self-congratulation and superiority.

Some practices are difficult, but the practice of empathetic joy is easy. Throughout the course of the day, when you see or hear about someone's virtue or good fortune, empathetically take joy in it. This will raise your own spirits and help you climb out of emotional sinkholes of depression and low self-esteem.

STAGE 4: CLOSE ATTENTION ● ● ●

By maintaining continuity of this training in a retreat setting, you will eventually achieve the fourth of the nine stages of attentional development, called *close attention*. At this point, due to the power of enhanced mindfulness, you no longer completely forget your chosen object, the tactile sensations of the breath at the nostrils. You may have experienced glimpses of this level of attentional stability intermittently before actually achieving this stage, but now it has become normal. Each of your sessions may now last an hour or longer, and throughout this time, your attention cannot be involuntarily drawn entirely away from the object. You are now free of coarse excitation. It's as if the attention has acquired a kind of gravity such that it can't be easily buffeted by gusts of involuntary thoughts and sensory distractions.

At this stage it is said that you achieve the *power of mindfulness*.²⁷ In the Indian and Tibetan Mahayana traditions, mindfulness is defined as the mental faculty of maintaining attention, without forgetfulness or distraction, on a familiar object. Since mindfulness prevents the attention from straying from one's chosen object, it acts as the basis for single-pointed, focused attention, known as *samadhi*.²⁸ Asanga defined mindfulness as "the nonforgetfulness of the mind with respect to a familiar object, having the function of nondistraction."²⁹ Likewise, his brother Vasubandhu defined it as not losing the object of the mind.³⁰

In recent years, a growing number of psychologists have been conducting research on mindfulness and its relevance to stress reduction, depression, and the alleviation of many other physical and mental problems. But they have characterized it in ways that are very different from the above description. According to one psychological paper on this topic, mindfulness is "a kind of nonelaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is."³¹ The authors of this paper propose a two-component model of mindfulness, the first involving the self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience, and the second involving an orientation that is characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance.

The modern psychological account of mindfulness, which is explicitly based on the descriptions of mindfulness presented in the modern Vipassana (contemplative insight) tradition of Theravada Buddhism, differs significantly from the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist version. The modern Vipassana approach views mindfulness as nondiscriminating, moment-to-moment "bare awareness"; the Indo-Tibetan tradition, however, characterizes mindfulness as bearing in mind the object of attention, the state of not forgetting, not being distracted, and not floating.³²

The scholar and teacher Bhante Gunaratana gives a clear description of the Vipassana view of mindfulness in his book *Mindfulness in Plain English*. There he describes mindfulness as nonconceptual awareness, or "bare attention," which does not label or categorize experiences. "Mindfulness," he says, "is present-time awareness... It stays forever in the present... If you are remembering your second-grade teacher, that is memory. When you then become aware that you are remembering your second-grade teacher, that is mindfulness."³³

While Gunaratana's description is representative of the current Vipassana tradition as a whole, it is oddly at variance with the Buddha's own description of mindfulness, or *sati*: "And what monks, is the faculty of *sati*? Here, monks, the noble disciple has *sati*, he is endowed with perfect *sati* and intellect, he is one who remembers, who recollects what was done and said long before."³⁴ In contrast to the Vipassana tradition's insistence that

mindfulness stays forever in the present, the Buddha states that it recollects events that are long past. Indeed, it is well known that the Pali term *sati* has as its primary meaning "recollection," or "memory," which is a conceptual faculty with which we recall past events. In addition to its connotation of "retrospective memory," *sati* also refers to "prospective memory," which enables us to remember to do things in the present and future, and this requires that the mind engage with concepts.

The *Milindapaṇḥa* is possibly the earliest attempt in Buddhist literature to state fully just what *sati* is. Questioned by King Milinda about the characteristics of *sati*, the monk Nagasena replies that it has both the characteristic of "calling to mind" and the characteristic of "taking hold." He explained further,

Sati, when it arises, calls to mind wholesome and unwholesome tendencies, with faults and faultless, inferior and refined, dark and pure, together with their counterparts. . . . Sati, when it arises, follows the courses of beneficial and unbeneficial tendencies: these tendencies are beneficial, these unbeneficial; these tendencies are helpful, these unhelpful.³⁵

So, rather than refraining from labeling or categorizing experiences in a nonjudgmental fashion, in the earliest, most authoritative accounts, *sati* is said to distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome, beneficial and unbeneficial tendencies. The contrast between the ancient and modern accounts is striking.

With his usual meticulous care, Buddhaghosa, the most authoritative commentator of the Theravada tradition, wrote:

[Sati's] characteristic is not floating; its property is not losing; its manifestation is guarding or the state of being face to face with an object; its basis is strong noting or the close applications of mindfulness of the body and so on. It should be seen as like a post due to its state of being set in the object, and as like a gate-keeper because it guards the gate of the eye and so on.³⁶

The modern description and practice of mindfulness are certainly valuable, as thousands of people have discovered for themselves through their own practice. But this doesn't take away from the fact that the modern understanding departs significantly from the Buddha's own account of *sati*, and from those of the most authoritative commentators in the Theravada and Indian Mahayana traditions.

Mindfulness is *cultivated* in the practice of shamatha, and it is *applied* in the practice of contemplative insight (Pali: *vipassana*; Sanskrit: *vipashyana*). This is clearly illustrated in the most foundational of all the Buddha's presentations of the practice of contemplative insight, namely his discourse on the four applications of mindfulness.³⁷ In this matrix of insight practices, discerning mindfulness is directed to the body, feelings, mental states and processes, and phenomena at large. Here the Buddha guides one through a detailed investigation of the origination, presence, causal efficacy, and dissolution of each of these domains of experience. This constitutes a rigorous contemplative science of the mind and its relation to the body and the environment, so there is much more to this discipline than bare attention alone, as is made abundantly clear in Buddhaghosa's authoritative commentary on this subject.³⁸

As mentioned previously, in the fourth stage of shamatha practice, you achieve the power of mindfulness, and the practice comes into its own. While your attention is no longer prone to coarse excitation, it is still flawed by a medium degree of excitation and coarse laxity.

When medium excitation occurs, you don't completely lose track of your object of attention, but involuntary thoughts occupy the center of attention and the meditative object is displaced to the periphery. To compare this with coarse excitation, let's again take the analogy of tuning into a radio station. Coarse excitation is like losing your chosen station altogether, as your tuner slips either to another station or into mere static. Medium excitation is like drifting slightly toward another station but not so completely that you can no longer hear your chosen station at all. You still hear it, but it's muffled by extraneous noise.

The achievement of the fourth stage brings with it a sense of accomplishment. You are now an experienced shamatha trainee, no longer a complete

beginner. If you have not gained a sound conceptual understanding of the entire shamatha path, you might well think you have already come to its culmination. This can easily give rise to some degree of complacency concerning your meditative practice, which brings its own dangers.

THE PRACTICE: MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING WITH THE ACQUIRED SIGN

After settling your body and respiration in their natural states, continue focusing your attention on the bare sensations of the breath at the apertures of your nostrils. At this stage in the practice, your respiration will be very calm and the tactile sensations of the breath will be correspondingly very subtle. They may even become so faint that you can't detect them at all. When that happens, it is important not to assume that there are no sensations, nor should you deliberately breathe more vigorously so that you can pick up those sensations again. Rather, observe more and more closely until you do detect the very subtle sensations of your breath.

As discussed previously, this is a unique quality of the breath as a meditation object. In other methods for developing shamatha, the object is bound to become more and more evident as you progress in the practice. But with the technique of mindfulness of breathing, as your practice deepens, the breath becomes more and more subtle, which challenges you to arouse greater and greater vividness of attention. So, rise to this challenge as you simultaneously cultivate a deeper sense of relaxation, stronger stability, and brighter vividness.

Allow your respiration, which represents the "air element" of lightness and movement, to carry the healing, balancing, soothing process deeper and deeper. Habitual mental images, arising involuntarily, will be superimposed on your sense impressions, including tactile sensations. In this practice, you are like a chemist separating out the impurities of superimpositions from the pure strain of the tactile sensations of the breath. As superimpositions are released, the sense of your body having definite physical borders fades and you enter deeper and deeper levels of tranquillity.

In the phases of mindfulness of breathing thus far, you have been attending in various ways to the tactile sensations of the respiration. However, to continue all the way along the path of shamatha, eventually you must shift your attention from the tactile sensations of breathing to an “acquired sign” (Pali: *uggaha-nimitta*), a symbol of the air element that appears before the mind’s eye as you progress in shamatha practice. To different people, acquired signs associated with the breath practice may appear like a star, a cluster of gems or pearls, a wreath of flowers, a puff of smoke, a cobweb, a cloud, a lotus flower, a wheel, or the moon or sun. The various appearances of the acquired sign are related to the mental dispositions of individual meditators. If you wish to continue on the path of mindfulness of breathing—which here explicitly turns into “mindfulness *with* breathing”—as soon as such a sign arises, shift your attention to this sign. This will be your object of attention as you proceed along the rest of the nine stages leading to shamatha.

At first your sign will arise only sporadically, so when it disappears, return to the previous sensations of the breath. But eventually it will appear more regularly and steadily, and from that point onward, focus your attention on this object. As you progress in this practice, increase the duration of your sessions for as long as you are able to maintain a quality of attention relatively free of laxity and excitation.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PRACTICE

The more advanced phases of the shamatha practice of mindfulness of breathing involving the acquired sign are described most authoritatively in Buddhaghosa’s classic volume *The Path of Purification*.³⁹ While Buddhaghosa includes certain kinds of tactile sensations among the acquired signs associated with the breath practice, the Indo-Tibetan Mahayana tradition emphasizes that advanced stages along the path to shamatha can be achieved only by focusing on a mental object, not a sensory impression.⁴⁰ The reason for this is that the development of shamatha entails the cultivation of an exceptionally high degree of attentional vividness. By focusing on an object of any of the physical senses, you can certainly develop stability,

but vividness will not be enhanced to its full potential. For this, a mental object is needed. It is commonly pointed out in the Buddhist tradition that shamatha is achieved with mental awareness, not sensory awareness.

Practicing mindfulness of breathing has its roots in the Buddha's teachings as written down in the Pali language and later commented on by Theravada scholars and contemplatives, and discourses attributed to the Buddha in the Mahayana tradition also emphasize this way of developing attentional balance. In *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in Ten Thousand Stanzas*, for example, the Buddha describes mindfulness of breathing to his disciple Shariputra by way of an analogy of a potter at his wheel.

Shariputra, take the analogy of a potter or a potter's apprentice spinning the potter's wheel: If he makes a long revolution, he knows it is long; if he makes a short revolution, he knows it is short. Shariputra, similarly, a Bodhisattva, a great being, mindfully breathes in and mindfully breathes out. If the inhalation is long, he knows the inhalation is long; if the exhalation is long, he knows the exhalation is long. If the inhalation is short, he knows the inhalation is short; if the exhalation is short, he knows the exhalation is short. Shariputra, thus, a Bodhisattva, a great being, by dwelling with introspection and with mindfulness, eliminates avarice and disappointment towards the world by means of nonobjectification, and he lives observing the body as the body internally.⁴¹

This is a wonderfully rich passage, warranting a detailed commentary, but for now I shall offer only a couple of comments. *Introspection* is a mental faculty having the function of monitoring the state of one's body and mind. With this faculty we note when the mind has succumbed to either laxity or excitation, and as soon as we do so, it is imperative to do whatever is necessary to overcome these imbalances. Mindfulness and introspection go hand in hand, as described in the above passage and countless other Buddhist meditation treatises. While the modern Vipassana tradition emphasizes that in the practice of mindfulness we must accept our faults without making any attempt to change them,⁴² this advice is a departure

from the Buddha's teachings and the writings of the great masters of the past. If you don't balance your attention when it strays into either laxity or excitement, you will only reinforce these mental imbalances, and the quality of your mindfulness will remain flawed indefinitely.

The term *nonobjectification* in this passage refers to no longer clinging to outer objects and events as the true sources of our joys and sorrows. Rather, we see that these feelings arise from our own minds, and this insight heals the mental affliction of avarice and the disappointment that results when our desires are obstructed.

I have known a number of Tibetan Buddhists who have tried to achieve shamatha by focusing on a deliberately generated or visualized mental image, unlike the acquired sign, which arises spontaneously when the mind is sufficiently focused on its meditative object. I tried this approach, too, when I first began practicing shamatha. Many of us—both Asians and Westerners—have found that the effort required to generate and sustain such an image is exhausting. If one practices concentrating on a deliberately visualized image for short periods, there may be no perceptible strain, but if this is done for many hours each day, for day after day, week after week, this can drain your energy and lead to excessive stress and tension. This may be why the Buddha declared that people who are especially prone to excessive conceptualizing should practice shamatha by cultivating mindfulness of breathing. Unlike many other techniques, it soothes the body and mind, rather than constricting them with sustained effort. Even though the mental image of the acquired sign does eventually arise in the practice of mindfulness of breathing, this happens spontaneously, so it does not cause the strain that may result from deliberate visualization.

AN ATTENTIVE WAY OF LIFE

Psychologists have found that the time generally needed to acquire expertise in a variety of high-level skills is five to ten thousand hours of training in a discipline of eight hours each day for fifty weeks in the year. This is roughly the degree of commitment required to progress along the entire path to the achievement of shamatha. Between formal meditation sessions,

it is vital to maintain a high degree of mindfulness and introspection throughout the day.

According to Buddhist psychology, when we detect something by way of any of our six senses—vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch, or mental perception—there is a very brief moment before the mind projects concepts and labels onto our immediate experience. Discerning this fraction of a second of pure perception, before concepts, classifications, and emotional responses overlay it, requires a high degree of vividness.⁴³ This brief instant is important because it is an opportunity for gaining a clearer perception of the nature of phenomena, including a subtle continuum of mental consciousness out of which all forms of sensory perception and conceptualization emerge.

A prominent school of Buddhist psychology states that about six hundred pulslike moments of cognition occur per second, and this accords roughly with modern psychology. These pulses of cognition occur in a continuum very much like frames in a motion picture film. Upon close examination, we discover that our experience is changing each moment. Our fundamental situation is one of change, which is a condition of the body, the mind, the environment, and awareness itself.

Although we have something like six hundred opportunities each second to apprehend some aspect of reality, Buddhist contemplatives and modern psychologists agree that we normally apprehend things at a rate much slower than that. In Buddhism the moments of cognition that don't knowingly engage with anything are called nonascertaining awareness. Appearances arise to the mind, but we don't register them, and afterward we have no recollection of having witnessed them. When we listen closely to music, for example, other sensory impressions, such as extraneous sounds, shapes, colors, and bodily sensations, are still being presented to our awareness, but we note only a very small fraction of them. Attention is highly selective.

Attentional stability is a measure of how many of the ascertained impulses of awareness are focused on our desired object. For example, if we have fifty moments of ascertaining cognition per second and all fifty are focused on the tactile sensations of breathing, this indicates a relatively high degree of stability. A distracted mind, on the other hand, has a high

proportion of those fifty ascertaining moments scattered in different fields of perception. Stability is *coherence* with regard to the chosen object. As we relax and our attention stabilizes, if vividness increases, we may experience a higher *density* of moments of ascertaining consciousness each second. The number of ascertaining moments focused on our chosen object may increase, for example, from fifty to a hundred.

During the hypnagogic state of consciousness—a deep state of relaxation as we fall asleep, with our minds withdrawn from the physical senses—there can be a high degree of vividness. I suspect that the exceptional vividness of this transitional phase of consciousness and of some dreams may be due in part to the fact that the mind is relaxed and disengaged from the senses, so there is little competition from other stimuli. But dreams are not usually stable, and we normally have little control in them. That is why the sequence of shamatha training begins with relaxation, then stabilizing attention, and finally maintaining relaxation and stability while gradually increasing vividness.

Many meditators emphasize vividness in their practice because they know that this brings them a kind of “high.” But the lasting achievement of vividness has two prerequisites, relaxation and stability. If you want to develop exceptional vividness, first develop relaxation, second develop stability, and then finally increase vividness. Underlying all these aspects of attention must be a foundation of equanimity, without which strong attentional and emotional vacillations will likely persist indefinitely. A general sign of spiritual progress is imperturbability in the face of the vicissitudes of life, and for this, equanimity is the key.



INTERLUDE EQUANIMITY

The cultivation of equanimity serves as an antidote to two of the primary afflictions of the mind: attachment and aversion. Attachment includes clinging to the serenity of shamatha, and aversion can arise by regarding all distractions to your practice, including other people, as disagreeable obstacles to your well-being. The essence of equanimity is impartiality. It is equanimity that allows loving-kindness, compassion, and empathetic joy to expand boundlessly. Normally, these qualities are mixed with attachment, but we grow beyond the mental affliction of attachment as we realize that every sentient being is equally worthy of finding happiness and freedom from suffering.

In Buddhism, a sense of one's self as an immutable, unitary, independent "I" is seen as a root cause of suffering. Clinging to this illusory, autonomous ego leads to the conviction that our own well-being is more important than that of other people. Normally, we live within a set of concentric rings of affection, with ourselves at the center. The first ring out from the center includes our loved ones and dear friends, and the next ring is our circle of friendly acquaintances. Farther out there is a very large ring of people toward whom we feel indifferent. The outermost ring includes people we regard as enemies, people who we believe have obstructed or may obstruct our desires for happiness. This way of prioritizing our feelings for others perpetuates self-centeredness. Equanimity overcomes such self-centeredness and its resultant attachment to and aversion for others.

Events in everyday life can sometimes give us glimpses of equanimity. One such event from my own life occurred when I was teaching at the

University of California at Santa Barbara and was invited to speak at the alternate graduation ceremony. This alternative commencement is a tradition that began in the 1960s when a small group of UCSB students organized a countercultural graduation ceremony in which each student is eulogized by a friend, parent, brother, or sister before receiving his or her diploma. The ceremony goes on and on as you hear how each person is the greatest daughter, the best surfer buddy, the most dedicated activist, the most inspiring friend, or the most cherished lover. Seeing the impression each person has made on someone else, I realized that these graduating students were strangers to me by circumstance only. With just a small shift in circumstances, each one could have been close to me. This is true of everyone in the world. With just a small shift, everyone who seems a stranger to us—each with hopes, fears, and yearnings—could be a dear friend.

When I first moved into a meditation hut high in the mountains above Dharamsala, I went to visit the Tibetan recluse Gen Jhampa Wangdü. In the spring of 1959, shortly after the Tibetan uprising against the Communist invasion of Tibet, Jhampa Wangdü fled his homeland and resumed life as a yogi in India. The day I first dropped by his hermitage made a great impression on me. He was not in strict retreat, so I knew I would not be interfering if I came by during the noon hour. I knocked on his door. A small man who looked a bit like the character Yoda from the movie *Star Wars* opened the door, his face filled with a big, warm smile, as if I were his long-lost son who had finally returned home. He radiated a sense of happiness and kindness. He invited me in and offered me tea. In different circumstances, I might have felt that I was special or that he was especially fond of me. Jhampa Wangdü's compassion and warmth were genuine, but it became obvious to me that his affection was utterly free of personal attachment. I expect anybody would have been received in the same way. But knowing this did not make this reception any less sweet. It was an experience of unconditional love, the key to happiness in any circumstances. This is how reclusive contemplatives maintain their connection to others despite the isolation and hardships of their lives.

Accomplished contemplatives are also remarkably free from impatience. They are free of an "Are we there yet?" attitude. Meditation is their way of

life. They may meditate twelve hours or longer each day...until they are enlightened. That is just their daily routine. They aren't waiting for success, gazing longingly at their calendars, hoping for quick results. The Tibetan verb *drupa*, commonly translated as "to practice," also means "to accomplish." When asked, "What are you doing?" a contemplative might answer, "I am practicing/accomplishing shamatha." Practice and achievement are one and the same.

In the circumstances in which most of us find ourselves, with jobs and family responsibilities, it is important to integrate the wisdom of the Buddhist teachings into our lives, so that in the course of our lives, like seasoned contemplatives, we are "practicing/accomplishing." This requires that we adopt a broad sense of what spiritual practice entails. This is not just meditating on a cushion. Resting, walking, or listening to music can be good for the heart, the body, and the mind, and with an altruistic motivation, all of life can become suffused with spiritual practice.

From the perspective of modern psychology, the fact that contemplatives can live in solitude for years without falling into depression, apathy, or mental turmoil is astonishing. Contemplatives are able to do this because they tap into and sustain an inner source of serenity, a source that soothes the body and mind so that all sense of impatience or expectation evaporates. By settling deeply in the calm and luminous stillness of awareness, an inner source of genuine well-being arises that dissipates any sense of loneliness, depression, or mental unease.

The cultivation of equanimity means learning to regard everyone with impartiality. No one is a stranger. When Gen Jhampa Wangdü opened the door to my knock thirty years ago, his heart-warming smile and gracious hospitality radiated equanimity. This is a capacity we can all unveil.

MEDITATION ON EQUANIMITY

After settling your body in its ground state and attending to your breath for a few moments, bring to mind a person you know well, whose background and living circumstances are familiar to you but who is neither a friend nor an enemy. Attend to this person. This person, like yourself, is striving for

happiness and freedom from pain, fear, and insecurity. Focus on this person and shift your awareness to view the world from her eyes. From this point of view, look back on yourself. Regardless of the distinct defects or excellent qualities this person might have, her yearning for happiness and wish to be free from pain and grief are identical to your own. Even though she is not close to the center of your personal universe, her well-being is no less significant than that of a dear loved one whom you may regard as crucial to your happiness.

Now bring to mind a person you feel is crucial to your well-being, a person for whom you have both affection and attachment. Attend closely to this loved one, and shift your awareness to the viewpoint of that person so that you perceive him as a human being like yourself, with both defects and excellent qualities. From this viewpoint, realize that although you are loved by some people, a great number of people feel indifferently toward you, and there also may be some people who don't like you. This person for whom you feel affection and attachment feels his own desires, hopes, and fears. Now step back and attend to this person from outside. This person is not a true source of your happiness, security, or joy, which can only arise from your own heart and mind.

Next bring to mind a person who may be intent on bringing you harm or depriving you of happiness, a person with whom you feel conflict. As before, imagine stepping into this person's perspective, being this person from the inside, and experiencing her hopes and fears. Fundamentally, this person, like yourself, wishes to find happiness and freedom from suffering. Now, step back and attend to her from outside with the realization that she is not the source of your distress or anxiety. If you feel uneasy or angry in relationship to this person, the source is in your own heart, not in the other person.

Realize that there is nothing inherent in the stranger, in the loved one, nor in the foe that makes the other person fall into one category or another. Circumstances change, relationships change, and it is the flux of circumstances that gives rise to the thoughts "this is my enemy" or "this is my loved one." Expand the field of awareness to embrace everyone in your immediate environment, their hopes, fears, aspirations, and yearnings. Each

person is as important as all others. Shifting circumstances bring us together and also cause us to part. Expand your field of awareness out over the whole community, reaching out in all directions, including everyone. Recognize that each person is fundamentally like yourself, and virtually everyone feels himself to be the center of his world.

Imagine the pure depths of your own awareness, unsullied by the obscurations of self-centered attachment and aversion, as an orb of radiant white light at your heart. With each exhalation, let this light spread out evenly in all directions to all persons with the yearning, "May each one, including myself, find happiness. May everyone, including myself, be free of suffering and the causes of suffering." Imagine a flood of light going out in all directions, soothing those who are distressed and bringing healing, happiness, and a sense of well-being to everyone. With each in-breath, draw in the distress and causes of unhappiness and pain of each sentient being. Imagine this as a dark cloud that dissolves into the light at your heart, and imagine all beings free of suffering and its causes.

Before you bring this session to a close, rest for a moment without bringing anything to mind. Settle your awareness in its own nature, with no object and with no subject. This is the even-mindedness that is a fertile foundation for all spiritual practices.