

SHAMATHA

Refined Attentional Balance



Practices and Readings

Compiled by Thupten Lekshe
Melbourne 2016

For guidance on these practices contact
a meditation teacher trained in one of the Shamatha traditions.

For more details refer to
the Monthly Shamatha website.

Compiled by Thupten Lekshe
for the Monthly Shamatha practice group,
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Please note this booklet contains instructions current in 2016.
A second edition containing more up to date protocols is
forthcoming.

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INTRODUCTION

In this booklet you will find a sequence of practices that have been used to develop refined attentional balance at least since the time of the Buddha 2,600 years ago. This second edition includes new practices and an updated set of contemporary readings.

The purpose of this booklet is to support sustained training in shamatha. Daily practice is crucial in maintaining any new skill and included in this booklet are readings that expand upon methods for maintaining a regular meditation routine. As well as daily practice, periods of more intensive meditation are also enormously important. This kind of short retreat from the demands of everyday life can be powerfully rejuvenating. Shamatha intensives, full days and weekends of practice are now offered regularly in Melbourne. Shamatha practice groups also operate in other Australian cities and internationally.

In Part 1 of this booklet you will find detailed instructions on a sequence of preliminary breath practices. Another more refined breath practice, taught by the Indian Buddhist contemplative Arya Asanga, is also included in this edition. The basic format of focusing on the breath exists in all the contemplative traditions.

This booklet uses a structure most explicitly taught by B. Alan Wallace. The breath practices are followed by two more advanced shamatha methods drawn from the Tibetan Dzogchen tradition. Various combinations of breath and the advanced practices are also detailed here.

Basic instructions are included on very brief practices that can be used to graduate from formal to informal practice. Since meditation works best without external guidance, a series of checklists has been included. These allow for easier memorization of key instructions as a way to develop robust self-guidance.

In Part 2 of the booklet a selection of readings expands upon the key features of the shamatha process.

Firstly, Ken McLeod frames meditation as an artistic endeavour that requires devotion and sustained practice. A complex set of skills is needed for working with the mind contemplatively and these can only be mastered by ongoing

practice. McLeod sees learning meditation as very much like making music—our minds are an instrument we can learn to “play” skillfully.

In the next piece Thupten Lekshe gives a short explanation of how formal and informal meditation practice might work together in creating a fuller contemplative life. He also briefly explains how insights and realisations can be spontaneous outcomes of practice as well as cultivated wisdoms.

The reading by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, an American monk in the Thai tradition, continues on with the theme of meditation as art. He expands upon ways to approach the breath practices that bring spaciousness and relaxation. This is an extract from a longer article that is available on request.

The next piece by revered Western monk Ajahn Sumedho gives an elegant instruction on how to relax our awareness into the space of the mind. This shows how the settling the mind practice is non-sectarian and also exists in the older Buddhist Theravadan traditions.

The final reading by Matthieu Ricard is an extract from his 2015 book on meditation. This is a pithy summary of the key message of the previous readings and also a pointer to the kind of mindfulness that connects to greater kindness in living.

The booklet closes with a short series of loving-kindness and compassion contemplations that can be used to start and finish formal shamatha sessions. These can imbue all our practice with the softness, affection and kindness alluded to by Matthieu Ricard.

Thupten Lekshe, Melbourne 2016

PART I
PRACTICES

OVERVIEW OF SHAMATHA

Shamatha (focused attention training) is designed to provide the kind of stable attention that is conducive to all kinds of mindfulness practice. We start the practice of shamatha in the supine (*shavasana*) position so we can more easily develop new associations and habits of relaxation as the foundation for all the rest of the practices we will engage in.

There are six shamatha practices (as taught by B. Alan Wallace). The first four are mindfulness of breath practices, and the last two are more advanced practices using either the space of the mind or awareness itself as the focus of attention. The mindfulness of breath practices help with cultivating the relaxation, stability and clarity that we will need to fully develop attentional balance.

Shamatha—mindfulness of breath practices

1. Full Body Awareness—enhances relaxation.
2. Abdomen Practice—establishes stability.
3. Nostrils Practice—develops clarity and vividness.
4. Asanga Breath Practice—activates relaxation, stability and clarity sequentially.

The last two shamatha practices will also create a much greater degree of refinement of attention as we progress through the higher of the nine stages of the shamatha training.

Shamatha—advanced practices

5. Settling the Mind in its Natural State.
6. Awareness of Awareness.

FULL BODY AWARENESS

*Adapted by Thupten Lekshe with permission,
from Shamatha Project, B. A. Wallace, 2007*

Practice 1

Shamatha is a special kind of attending, and most of all it is a practice. When we begin the training we are arousing a state of ease and awareness. With more practice we can develop a lasting mental state of balanced attending. With long-term, sustained practice we can even evolve a trait, or a way of life—an enduring default state of peace and well-being.

When the mind is distracted, letting go is the first step—not contracting, but releasing and coming back to the focus of the breath. Most problems in this practice arise because people are trying too hard. Rather than repeatedly letting go, there is a relentless ambition that is self-defeating. The place to start and the place to come back to repeatedly in this practice of Full Body Awareness is relaxation.

Starting with Relaxation

Full Body Awareness is a mindfulness of breath practice that is especially restorative, particularly in the supine position. We balance the whole system by cultivating a state of relaxation. This is most helpful when we are getting impatient or frustrated, like when we start thinking, “*I’m not a success, I can’t do this, I must be a loser.*” When that kind of thinking comes up, we can just release and come right back to the sanctuary of the body. It’s not being lazy at all, it is just getting back to our baseline.

It’s like seeing a tree and noticing that the leaves are not healthy. We need to start with the root system to address that problem. At the beginning we can use mulch and fertilizer, make sure there is plenty of water and not worry too much about the leaves. When we come back to the roots the leaves will take care of themselves.

We need to become familiar with the supine position and only then carry on with the other practices. It’s an ideal fall-back. Full Body Awareness also works well in the sitting position.

We are progressing step by step and the very first step can be a welcoming one. Relaxation is where we start.

Attending to tactile sensations

Once we have settled into the posture, either supine or sitting, then we can let our awareness settle into the tactile sensations throughout the body, settling the body at ease, relaxed and comfortable. Letting the whole face relax into an expression of repose, letting the shoulders relax, feeling the muscles soften.

Respiration in its natural rhythm

The body is still, and even though lying down, we remain in a posture of vigilance. We stay awake, not letting ourselves fall asleep. And then we settle the respiration in its natural rhythm, being aware that this is an ongoing channel that becomes subtler and subtler as we go deeper into the practice. More and more we relinquish any effort, any impulse of control or regulation, truly breathing as if deeply asleep, effortlessly, but still wide awake.

Body asleep, mind awake

With each out-breath we relax more and more, releasing any tension in the body, as if with a sigh of relief. Immediately, almost effortlessly, we release any thoughts and images that arise in the mind. We let them simply dissolve back into the space of the mind. With each out-breath, we settle into a deeper sense of ease, as if the body were falling asleep. However we are not losing any level of clarity or vividness of attention. It is as if we were falling asleep consciously.

ABDOMEN

*Adapted by Thupten Lekshe with permission,
from Shamatha Project, B. A. Wallace, 2007*

Practice 2

Trying Hard versus Relaxation

It is important to stress that shamatha is not just about learning to concentrate. There are many people from different professions who really know how to concentrate, for example: jet pilots, chess players, mathematicians, musicians. They can be really good at concentrating. And yet after they have been working for a long time, they are really exhausted and drained.

This is a fundamental difference between the quality of attentional stability cultivated in meditation versus the focused attention created by trying hard and having a strong ego-drive. To put it more simply, there are two different ways of developing attentional stability: top-down and bottom-up.

—**Top-down:** “I’m going to achieve focus on this or bust; I’m not going to let any thought into my mind!” When you see your mind getting distracted, you become like a harsh parent, you scold your mind every time it misbehaves. So that is one way—the sheer effort-way. This can work in the short run but it is really damaging in the long term. There is nothing wholesome about it. When you apply this kind of top-down approach, it lacks the derivative benefits of greater kindness, empathy, centeredness and mindfulness.

—**Bottom-up:** Bottom-up is where you start with a solid base of ease and relaxation in the body. It is like you are travelling in low gear—we use different approaches to shamatha to deal with different types of terrain and different inclines. We use full body awareness when we are going up a steep hill and it is muddy and there are all kinds of potholes. Then we need a lower gear, that is full body awareness in the supine position.

Transitional Practice

However it is hard to make ongoing progress just by focusing on such coarse sensations as the full body awareness. It can be very helpful in calming and settling the attention but it is mostly a grounding practice.

We need to move to a more contained focus so as to corral and train the attention until it becomes continuous. This is the function of the abdomen

practice, where the focus is on the sensation of the breath rising and falling in the belly area. This focus is more narrow than in full body awareness but still broad enough to keep us involved without too much effort.

When the mind is very busy and turbulent, with a lot happening, we need to release and to settle the energy by using the sensations of the breath at the abdomen. This is a stabilizing practice.

Attention downward

Yogis over centuries have recommended directing the attention downwards as an ideal method for overcoming excitation and creating stable attentional focus. Downwards means down from where you think you normally are, behind your eyes. Focusing down settles the attention on the sensations in the rather course sensations of the belly area.

Counting

Counting the breaths can be helpful in thinning out the thoughts and maintaining a greater continuity of mindfulness. Among the various methods of counting, a simple version is to place succinctly the count “one” at the end of the inhalation. Then we quietly relax all the way through the out-breath, releasing any thoughts that may arise. We continue relaxing right through the end of the out-breath until the breath flows in effortlessly. We can gently enliven the attention during inhalation, and then again, at the end of the in-breath, mentally count, “two.” It is like having milestones on a country road, we use the number just to keep our bearings in the practice. It is important to remember though that this is mindfulness of breathing, not mindfulness of counting. We can experiment with this method of counting; if it is helpful we use it, but if it begins to clutter the mind we can let it go. Combining the three elements—the downward incline of the attention, the fullness of the sensations in the belly, and the counting – is very helpful in calming the mind. With fewer discursive thoughts, a greater sense of inner silence can develop.

NOSTRILS

*Adapted by Thupten Lekshe with permission,
from Shamatha Project, B. A. Wallace, 2007*

Practice 3

Apertures of nostrils or top lip

So far we have covered the first two mindfulness of breath practices—Full Body Awareness and Abdomen. In the third practice we elevate and narrow the focus of attention to the sensations of the in-and-out-breath on the apertures of the nostrils or above the upper lip. We attend gently wherever we most distinctly perceive the sensations of the breath. We are observing these sensations with as little superimposition as possible. As we focus our mental awareness on this little area it is important that the eyes remain soft and the forehead smooth without any contraction. This practice engages fully a vividness of attention.

Mental and tactile Awareness

Mental awareness is conjoined with tactile awareness. This involves mindfulness, but we need to check that the visual attention, the eyes themselves, are disengaged from the practice. The focus of attention is purely that of mental awareness, released from any visual perception. We are simply letting our mental awareness be held by our tactile awareness.

Quality of the breath

We can note the duration of each in-breath and each out-breath. To the best of our ability we maintain a flow of mindfulness with an ongoing flow of sensations, both during inhalation and exhalation, and also at the turn-around points. We can let this be a full-time engagement, with no time off, no lapses.

Gatekeeping

We place mindfulness at the aperture of the nostrils as if our awareness were a gatekeeper at the gates of a walled city, not following the travellers inside the city or outside, monitoring just the gateway.

A long term practice

This is the vehicle that we can follow for the long-term. For those interested in doing more intensive training in shamatha, this is the kind of practice we

can use until “the acquired sign” arises (a purely mental image of the breath.) And that will take us all the way up to the ninth stage of shamatha*. All the Buddhist teachings and all the reports from those who engage in sustained practice agree that the focus at the nostrils is ideal for the acquired sign to arise. Focusing on the sensations of the abdomen or full body awareness, it simply not subtle enough. For people wanting to practice mindfulness of breathing as a method to reach advanced stages of shamatha, this is the long-term ticket.

**For an outline of the nine stages of shamatha see “The Attention Revolution” by B. Alan Wallace.*

ASANGA BREATH PRACTICE

*Adapted by Thupten Lekshe with permission,
from Shamatha Retreat, B. A Wallace, 2016*

Practice
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Origin

This practice is from one of the classic works of Asanga from the 4-5th Century. It is called in Sanskrit, the *Sravakabhumi*, or the grounds (levels) of the *Sravakas* (hearers). The *Anapanasati Sutta* of the Buddha and the great commentary by Buddhaghosa give very comprehensive explanations of mindfulness of breathing in sixteen phases with the first four as shamatha and the last twelve as vipassana practices. This comes straight from the Buddhist Theravada canon. Interestingly, Asanga picks up on these sixteen phases as well but he comments on them from the Mahayana Indian Buddhist perspective.

Instruction

In all the shamatha breath practices it is ideal to start by releasing the awareness right down to the ground and settling the body in a state of relaxation, stillness and vigilance. In order to settle the inner voice of the mind we also settle the respiration into its natural rhythm, just allowing the body to breathe without interference.

In mindfulness of breathing as taught by Arya Asanga the object of mindfulness is the energetic fluctuations of respiration. This is breathing in and out with awareness of the whole field of the body. The focus is on the space of the body and the sensations correlated with the respiration throughout. It is essential to allow the breath to flow effortlessly, unimpededly, egolessly. This is not so easy. To release all influence over something we are closely attending to feels unnatural.

A key to learning this skill is the out-breath. By releasing in everyway with each exhalation we can become deeply relaxed in the body. This especially includes the muscles of the face. We soften and loosen with every breath out, releasing all the way to the end with nothing left in reserve, and also releasing all the activities of the mind. This includes thoughts, memories, imaginations, desires. We give it all away. Like water sinking into sand, our awareness becomes immersed in the non-conceptual field of tactile sensations.

In his explanation of the practice Asanga follows very closely the core

instructions of the Buddha—when the in-breath is long, we note it is long; when the out-breath is long, we note it is long; when the in-breath is short, we note that, and when the out-breath is short we note that as well.

Teaching

A number of theories and practices outlined in the sutras and in the commentaries by the great pandits and siddhas of India became marginalized in the Tibetan tradition. The Tibetans highlighted theories and practices they found most helpful and most essential. They were certainly comprehensive in their choices and they were very successful over more than a thousand years. But some texts like the *Sravakabhumi*, this magnificent masterpiece by Asanga, include teachings not found in the Tibetan literature.

I have noticed that over the years His Holiness the Dalai Lama in his global teachings keeps coming back to India. When he is teaching Tibetans he often teaches Tibetan literature, but when he is teaching globally he returns to the great masters—Shantideva, Nagarjuna, Kamalashila, and Asanga too.

I have found Asanga's approach and his quite detailed explanation of mindfulness of breathing very powerful and meaningful. It closely accords with the Buddha's own teaching on mindfulness of breathing. In Asanga's practice the object of mindfulness is not focusing at the nostrils or on the rise and fall of the abdomen. It is also not visualizing anything. With Asanga's approach the whole system calms down and the body will certainly need less and less air. This is not something you are trying to make happen. We are not trying to outsmart the body. We are just letting the body sort itself out. We settle the respiration in its natural rhythm. Over time the breath becomes shallower as your body needs less and less air. So when your breathing is short you know that it is short. You settle into a steady frequency of breathing. This is probably going to turn out to be about 15 cycles per minute, about 4 seconds for a complete respiration—very shallow, very calm. Over time the amplitude of the breath naturally decreases. It is like a sine wave, like a damped sine wave. The breath gets shallower and shallower.

Question

You mentioned that in order to achieve shamatha the tactile sensations of the breath must subside. So there is no object in this regard. But then you said it is still possible to experience the rhythm of the breath. Isn't the rhythm just a form of tactile sensations?

Answer

First, I will highlight a subtle terminological difference between respiration and breath. When we refer to breath we mean the air coming in and out and going down to the lungs. If somebody gets punched in the stomach we say they had the wind knocked out of them. But there is no air down in the stomach. The air goes down to the lungs, but nowhere else. It goes down and then what we don't need comes out. That is the breath—the passage of the air from the apertures of the nostrils down to the lungs and coming out again.

In respiration the whole body is breathing. This is clearly tactile, the passage of the air over the nerve endings above the upper lip and at the apertures of the nostrils. We are sensing these fluctuations.

I am going to use the word *prana* because this term refers to the breath on a subtle level and also to the vital energies, to chi. This is what Asanga is referring to—you are attending to the fluctuations (the movement) of the prana within the body. As the breath is going in and out you may find these fluctuations down in your legs, certainly in your abdomen, in your limbs, in so many places where the air is not going. You are attending to all of that.

But are you attending to the rhythm of the breath by way of tactile sensations? Yes, clearly. And can you continue to attend to those tactile sensations, which are in the desire realm? You have dropped your anchor of awareness in the desire realm by attending to these tactile sensations; they are subtle, but they are still in the desire realm. Since they are tactile they belong to one of the five sensory fields. So can you focus on this as the whole system quietens down, gets subtler and subtler and subtler.

So how far can you go? Certainly up to stage 7, 8, 9 of the shamatha stages. And all the time the sensations are getting extremely subtle. What will remain if you stay engaged with the breath as the practice deepens? It is like the two of us shaking hands and then the handshake gets subtler and subtler but we remain engaged and the hands are still clasped. If you move your hand I am still with you. I pick up the sensations. If your intention is engaged with these sensations, and the sensations are getting extremely subtle, then your mind is getting extremely subtle. If it doesn't then you could just as well be shaking hands with thin air. The very fact the sensations get subtler and subtler as you proceed along these nine stages is a feedback loop to invite you to ascend to a subtler and subtler state of awareness. You can remain discerningly aware of extremely subtle sensations of the breath. But this is still in the desire realm.

And when you cross the threshold on stage nine you are still in the desire realm. You have really fantastic *samadhi*, but your mind is still dwelling within the desire realm. So what distinguishes between stage nine and actually achieving shamatha?

It is crossing the threshold. This is very much like putting one foot through the door. Now you can ask, have you entered the room if one foot is through the door? The answer is yes, your foot is in the room even though you don't have your whole body in the room. Are you fully in? No. Part of your body is outside, but you have crossed the threshold—and that is shamatha. That is access to the first *jhana* and you have crossed the threshold into the form realm. If that is the case, if your mind is attending to the form realm. Something that transcends the desire realm can't still be anchored in the desire realm. So how does this work?

We have evidence straight from science that touches on this. It is well established that one can be dreaming and yet have no awareness of anything in the physical environment. Your body is lying in bed and you don't know whether you are facing down or on your side. Your awareness is withdrawn from the five physical domains and totally in the mental domain. But even in the midst of a dream you start practicing mindfulness of breathing. You can do this even though there is no air in the dream. You can practice mindfulness of breathing in a dream and have no access whatsoever to the five senses. The rhythm of dream breath corresponds exactly to the bodily breath rhythm of the body lying in bed. I am attending to my breath but I am not attending to anything physical at all. When you are having an ordinary lucid dream, are the appearances in your dream in the desire realm? Yes, of course they are. One could be having a dream of an extremely attractive person and feeling sexual arousal; there is plenty of desire, but you are out of all five sensory fields. You are solidly in the mental domain.

What if your mind has dissolved into the substrate consciousness? You have not achieved shamatha, but you are in that domain. When you are resting in the cognizance of your substrate consciousness, what you are aware of is divorced from dream reality and all the creations of your samsaric mind, your desire realm mind. You are withdrawn from all the five sensory faculties of the desire realm; your mind is clear and bright, aware of a field that is devoid of appearances. In this state you can be aware of the rhythm of the breath even without being aware of tactile sensations. In a dream you don't have any tactile

sensations, you are not aware of your body lying in bed. Whatever appears to be a tactile sensation of your body in the dream is not a tactile sensation, it is purely mental. It is not then a leap to say you can be in a state where there are no appearances but intuitively, on a very subtle level, you are still in touch with the breath rhythm. It is a deep rhythm. This is core. This is prana. So even in the absence of appearances there is still awareness of the flow of respiration.

SETTLING THE MIND IN ITS NATURAL STATE

Practice 5

*Adapted by Thupten Lekshe with permission,
from Shamatha Project, B. A. Wallace, 2007*

Introduction

In this practice the eyes are at least partially open and the gaze rests vacantly in the space in front. The focus is not on any visual object, any shape or colour, but just resting vacantly. We are directing the full force of our mindfulness to the space of mental events, to the contents of experience not detectable with any of the five physical senses or any instruments of technology. This is the space in which discursive thoughts arise—mental chitchat, images, memories, fantasies, desires, all manner of mental events. We are directing our attention, our mindfulness, to this sixth domain of experience not included in any of the five physical senses.

If you are new to this practice it might be helpful at the beginning to deliberately generate a discursive thought. This could be any thought, for example, “this is the mind.” Slowly and deliberately generate this mental sentence, syllable by syllable, directing full attention to this mental event. As soon as the thought dissolves back into the space of the mind, keep the attention fixed right where it was; holding the attention there and you will have found the domain. Now quietly observe whatever next arises within this field, this space of the mind; it might be another discursive thought, or perhaps a mental image. Whatever arises just let it be and attend to it with a discerning mindfulness, in no way trying to modify the contents of the experience.

At the beginning it is easy to lose the domain. When that happens, once again, deliberately generate a thought, or a mental image (perhaps a familiar face or a fruit or a vegetable). Generate the image, experience it with mental perception; then let the image fade and keep your attention right where it was.

Let it be—free of distraction and grasping

It can feel as though the mind is going into free-fall. Mostly we hold onto the most superficial levels of mental activity by grasping and identifying ourselves with thoughts—I am my thinking and I am my emotions. I want this, I want

that, so I am my desires as well. We become entangled like a fly in a spider's web. This practice is to disentangle and go into free-fall; and in doing so the mental processes and states that are normally unconscious can become conscious; the awareness descends through layer upon layer of mental activity. In this process what will bubble up will be memories, emotions, desires, fantasies, all kinds of mental phenomena.

Conscious and Unconscious

Over the last years various neurobiologists have commented that they are really not much interested in consciousness, even though they are neuroscientists. The reason they give is that most of what goes on in the mind, let alone the brain, is unconscious. So the conscious is a bit like pond scum. They may very well be right. But the notion of a subconscious has been around long before Freud came along with his own unique insight. The notion of there being non-manifest mental processes and states that actively influence our decisions, desires and behaviours, has been around since the time of the Buddha. In Buddhist psychology they are called mental factors, which can be both manifest as well as non-manifest. In addition, there is the whole dimension of what the Buddhists call *samskaras* or mental imprints, mental predilections, which are more and more seed-like than subconscious.

In this practice of settling the mind in its natural state, it will become evident that we are lowering the threshold of that which is conscious. It seems that the demarcation line between the subconscious and the unconscious is not some kind of a fixed barrier, but rather a very malleable, permeable border. Sometimes it is ridiculously high. For example, we have all seen people (or maybe we have been the person) who, on a certain occasion will say in a very loud and angry voice with veins pulsing and a red face, "*I am not upset. I'm not angry, I'm perfectly calm.*" It is obvious to everyone but the person themselves that they are upset. The person may very well be speaking honestly but completely incorrectly. They are making an honest mistake. The person at the time is simply not aware of how much anger or indignation and moral outrage there is. In that particular five-second interval, that person's anger is unconscious to them. When they calm down, at least retrospectively they can say, "*Oh, I see, I remember, that's called anger.*" They become aware. It becomes conscious retrospectively.

This practice of settling the mind in its natural state is starting with the most superficial level of what is obvious in our minds, and directing our awareness to the space of the mind. We experience thoughts arising, desires, certainly memories, mental images, video clips, emotions, and we come to know more intimately what is immediately manifest.

The Substrate

This practice is one of the greatest adventures one can possibly have if one is interested in the mind and exploring its inner recesses. We not only bring to the light of consciousness that which is normally subconscious, but the endpoint is when the mind has settled in its natural state, a state which is not contrived conceptually or fabricated. This is called the substrate consciousness (*alayavijnana* in Sanskrit) and it is beneath the subconscious. It's profound. It's simple. It's inactive.

Substrate and Dream-state

The substrate is the relative ground state of our own psyche, that out of which our psyche emerges when we come from deep sleep into a dream state, and from dream to the waking state. So we're doing this disappearing and appearing act, in and out of the substrate consciousness. From dream to dream in a single dream cycle throughout the course of the night, a dream psyche emerges and then flows back into the substrate consciousness. Ninety minutes pass by and another dream emerges. Perhaps you don't remember the last dream. So you're reborn into the next dream and then you die from that dream, and you go through multiple reincarnations in a single night, and then finally you wake up from a dream, and then you're in this bigger dream that we call waking reality.

So this settling the mind in its natural state, is an unguided tour through various dimensions of conscious through unconscious processes which become conscious by the practice. Finally there can be a settling, when the stone goes thump and hits the bottom of the pond, and at last you've come to the substrate consciousness.

It is really quite an extraordinary practice.

AWARENESS OF AWARENESS

*Adapted by Thupten Lekshe with permission,
from Genuine Happiness, B. Alan Wallace, 2005*

Practice 6

Introduction

In the previously described practice of settling the mind in its natural state, we attended to the space of the mind and whatever was arising within that space, but in the awareness of being aware, we simply allow awareness to rest in its own place, conscious of itself.

Practice

Settle your body in its natural state, as you have done in the previous meditations, bringing forth the qualities of relaxation, stillness, and vigilance. Let your body reflect the quality of your mind. The quality of awareness that you are cultivating here is one that is at ease, still, and calm, and at the same time bright, vivid, sharp, and clear.

Mindfulness of Breath

To help calm the mind, begin with mindfulness of breathing, using counting if you need to, as before. Now, as in the practice of settling the mind in its natural state, let your eyes be at least partially open. Rest your gaze in the intervening space between the point where you feel you are looking from and the shapes and colours that appear in the field of vision. Rest your gaze in the space itself, not on any visual object. Continue breathing into the abdomen in a natural, unforced manner.

Awareness of Awareness

Now radically simplify your awareness, not focusing on the breath, or even on the contents of your mind. Settle your awareness in the very state of being aware. Perhaps this is your most primary and reliable knowledge—prior to and more certain than any knowledge that you have of the outside world, even of your own body, even of the contents of your own mind. This is the awareness of the sheer fact of being aware. This is sometimes called shamatha without a sign. In this practice, you are not focussing on any object, mental or physical. You are not directing your awareness inward or outward; awareness is equally

present both outwardly and inwardly, and prior to making such a division of experience. Simply let awareness settle in its own nature. Thoughts may come and go, but they do not obscure the nature of awareness; they are expressions of it.

In the midst of thoughts that compulsively arise and pass in the field of your awareness, do you detect anything unchanging, as still as space itself? It is said that awareness can manifest all kinds of sensory and mental representations. The quality of awareness that reveals itself in such forms is called clarity, or luminosity, and that is one of the distinguishing qualities of consciousness. It is like radiant space that illuminates everything that arises in that space, yet its radiance remains even in moments when consciousness has no discernible object. Can you detect in your experience a clarity in the midst of mental imagery, like the face of a mirror with or without a reflection?

Furthermore, awareness is not simply the clarity or luminosity of appearances manifesting. It has a second quality, and that is cognizance. Awareness is imbued with a quality of knowing. Not only do appearances arise to awareness, but awareness also apprehends these appearances, enabling us to report on them afterward. Images arise, for instance, in a mirror, but the mirror doesn't know they are there. In the space of the mind, on the other hand, appearances arise and we know of their presence. Can you discern the event of sheer knowing?

This can be the most relaxing of all the practices. Focussing on a specific object (either the breath or the space of the mind) can still create a very subtle grasping. When done correctly you are still reaching out and touching something, and then holding on in a manner of speaking, very lightly.

Don't let your mind become so focused that it impedes your breathing. Now and then monitor your breath and see that it is flowing naturally, without any constraints from your flow of attention. Let your belly remain soft, and continue breathing effortlessly into the abdomen.

Gentle Vase Breathing

You can also try an experiment within the practice. Continue breathing as you have been into the abdomen, naturally and unforced, such that when you inhale it expands a little bit. As the abdomen expands during inhalation, it takes on a slightly rotund shape. When you exhale, maintain some of that roundness, that vase-like shape. Do this gently, without straining the muscles

of the belly. Maintain a bit of the fullness of the abdomen during the out-breath as if it were waiting for the next in-breath. It expands a bit further as you breathe in. See if this has any beneficial effect on the practice. This is called gentle vase breathing, and many Tibetan contemplatives have found it useful for stabilizing the mind. Another experiment you can try is breathing through the mouth. These two techniques are not crucial to the practice, but if you find either of them helpful, continue. It is crucial, though, to keep the eyes open. This helps to unclutter the mind, enhances the clarity of awareness, and also begins to break down the false duality that there is an outside and an inside to the mind.

Undulating breath

You can also make the practice more accessible by very gently conjoining it with the breath in a slightly different fashion. It can be even more calming to gently pair our awareness with the undulations or oscillations of the breath. This is a variation that Padmasambhava teaches. It has been taught for centuries as a way, in one cycle, to overcome both laxity and excitation. So it is worth being at least a little familiar with it. You may want to have it there in reserve.

With your eyes gently open, your gaze resting vacantly in the space in front of you, allow your respiration to continue to flow without regulation, effortlessly, maintaining a peripheral awareness that the in-breath is taking place, that the out-breath is taking place; just enough to settle into the pace of the undulations of the breath.

During inhalation, very gently, but with clear focus, invert your awareness in upon itself, in upon that which is observing. Be vividly aware of the experience of being aware.

Arouse your attention with each in-breath, gently overcome any tendency of dullness or laxity. And with each out-breath, release your awareness into the space in front of you, utterly letting go, relaxing deeply, attending to no object, just releasing. With each out-breath, if any thoughts have arisen, just release them without hesitation. Any thought that arises, just release it without evaluation. Instantly, let it go. And let your awareness rest as much as possible without any object, without any sign. As you release with each out-breath, you remedy the tendency for excitation, agitation. With each in-breath, arouse your attention, with each out-breath, release. And throughout the whole cycle of respiration sustain an ongoing flow of awareness of awareness. Practicing in

this way there is very little room for grasping—when you draw your awareness inward, there is nothing to hold on to. When you release your awareness out in the space, if you grasp onto something, you are not doing the practice. So you are just releasing over and over with no grasping.

To engage in this practice effectively, it needs to be done with a very core of looseness of the body and the mind. Discover if you are more relaxed by breathing through the nostrils or the mouth.

In this practice, there is no literal object or something we are focusing on. But we do sustain the mindfulness of the experience of being aware. So nominally, the object of mindfulness is awareness itself.

In all shamatha practices there are two faculties. The first is mindfulness, where we remember what we are focussing on, in this case awareness itself. The second is introspection, where we periodically check for the presence of excitation and laxity. If we find ourselves sitting with simply a blank mind (i.e. laxity has arisen) we need to arouse the attention and pay closer attention to the experience of being aware. If excitation arises, as always, we release the thought or other mental event. We also release the grasping. Then we rest again in the awareness of being aware.

ASANGA PRACTICE VERSUS SETTLING THE MIND

*Adapted by Thupten Lekshe with permission,
from Shamatha Retreat, B. A. Wallace, 2016*

Overview of Settling the Mind

This approach to mindfulness of breathing explained by Asanga has deep similarities to the practice of settling the mind in its natural state. The practice of settling the mind is very simple; it remains homogenous all the way through the various stages of shamatha. The heart of the practice is single-pointedly focussing on the space of the mind and whatever arises within it. The pith instruction is to sustain the flow of mindfulness without grasping or distraction. Not being distracted means not being drawn away to appearances outside the target of the meditative object. Not grasping means not identifying with any subjective mental processes—thinking, desiring, remembering, imagining, emoting.

To do this practice we need to be deeply relaxed right at the core. It is really an existential kind of relaxation and not in any way a fancy technique. It is the kind of relaxation in which you could pass through death fearlessly. We have to enhance relaxation all the way up to the ninth stage of shamatha not just in the early stages.

The nature of this settling the mind practice is that it performs two very different functions. On the one hand it is a shamatha method, a mental focusing that enhances the three qualities; and on the other hand it is an awareness that allows the mind to heal itself, to unknot itself.

In this practice we just letting the neuroses, the resentments to come up—the craving, lust, attachment, arrogance. When they arise in this field of awareness they are clearly illuminated in a space of loving presence. This is not cold, clinical or aloof. The whole practice should be an expression of loving kindness, both to ourselves and to everyone else. When we push this loving kindness to the limit it becomes suffused with bodhicitta free of distraction and free of grasping. Within this space you can watch the mind heal.

But this is rarely a smooth process where each session and each day the practice gets clearer and clearer. The practice can catalyze deeper unconscious

processes and content. So it is going to be bumpy ride. Some days, even after you have been practicing for months, it can feel like the worst time you've ever had. And then the next few days might be the best you've ever had. And then it is back to the drawing board again. But if you watch your progress over time, and especially if you have a conducive environment, with good companions and teachers and the right conditions, you can really experience the slow healing of the mind.

Comparison to the Asanga Breath Practice—Stillness and Motion

That was a brief review of the settling the mind practice. In the Asanga breath practice we are bringing exactly the same quality of awareness to the space of the body. Again it is without distraction and without grasping. In each of these practices you are cultivating a simultaneity of stillness and motion. There is the stillness of your awareness and then the motion of the fluctuations of prana within your body from breath to breath.

You are tuning in with a loving presence and discerning mindfulness. Then the Buddha's instruction makes sense. "When your in-breath is long, note that it is long, when your out-breath is long, note that it is long, and when your in-breath is short, note that it is short, when your out-breath is short, note that it is short."

When we set out in this practice at first there is coarse tuning. Later it becomes finer. This progression from coarse to subtle arises all the time in Buddhism.

Here in the Asanga breath practice it goes from coarse breathing to subtle breathing. There is a very close parallel with the settling the mind practice where even as you settle, you don't find a smooth trajectory of your mind getting calmer, happier, more peaceful. It is a bumpy road with all these upheavals; they are like potholes or boulders on your path. But they are not really obstacles. They are part of the practice, integral to the practice. It is very important we don't run away from them. Similarly, as you attend to the fluctuations of the breath and the movement of the body corresponding to the primal rhythm of the respiration, on some occasions you might find the breath is really long. On another occasion you find it long on the in-breath, but short on the out-breath. And then later it might reverse. Sometimes it is long, long, long, and then short, short, short, interspersed. This is the coarse tuning. The most important instruction is not to mess with it. Let the breath

just sort itself out. The body-mind system is balancing itself. It is a lot smarter than you are, even smarter than your intelligence, smarter than your ego. So don't mastermind the process, don't override it. From breath to breath the body knows, the body will take what it needs and give back what it doesn't.

Then there may come a time when it is subtle, subtle, subtle, that is, short, short, short. And you may slip into a classic cycle of around fifteen cycles of breath per minute. When that happens we can move into, "attending to the whole body one breathes in, and attending to the whole body one breathes out." This is the next phase of the Buddha's instruction in the Anapanasati Sutta. Now you go into flow and you stay with it.

As the fine-tuning takes place you remain continuously engaged without being distracted. From there it can really get more homogenous, finer and finer. The amplitude gets shorter and shorter with the increase in subtlety until you come to the actual achievement of shamatha. And then you have the major, unprecedented shift of the prana. It is really a physiological shift of your baseline.

All the great yogis and masters emphasize that the final phase of shamatha is a complete transformation of your mental and physical pliancy. Before there might have been spikes, but now there is a total shift in the pranic alignment of the whole body-mind system.

Dealing with Upheavals

If you are practicing settling the mind in its natural state and getting involved in all the mental events that are arising you are not meditating. That is just hanging out with your mind. You have already been doing that for a long time. For it to be meditation you need to retain the awareness of the space of the mind and not be distracted, not be drawn into the experiences.

Similarly with the Asanga breath practice there will be times when the somatic experiences are not going to be pleasant. Eruptions occur, upheavals occur; *Nyam* occur, and they can occur very early. There are all these blockages, knots, in the body, and you might get introduced to these early on. If all you do is experience them whilst at the same time thinking, "*Oh this sucks, my body is so uncomfortable, breathing in sucks, breathing out sucks, oh I don't like this, it is so tight,*" you won't be meditating. You are just going on like you always do, giving in to the ongoing commentary. It is the same old cognitive fusion. My body, my feelings, my, my, my.

So we need to bring some wisdom to the practice. As you are resting there in the stillness of your awareness, whatever comes up somatically—let it be. The big challenge is to attend to whatever comes up in the field of the body without preference. You can't do that if you are identifying with it. If you release that tendency, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, it is what it is. Let it be an orphan, arising and passing of its own accord. Just like emotions, thoughts, memories, occurring in the mind, somatic experiences also just come and go.

You can get into a flow of the practice where you simply rest in the stillness of your awareness knowing the fluctuations of the respiration throughout the field of the body. Resting without preference. Just giving up all the wanting and wishing, and sitting with what is happening. Letting the breath and the body sort itself out. All the grasping and the clinging permeated by anxiety is just the nature of the mind. There are good days and bad days and we have to get used to that. But we don't have to let it define the practice.

Conclusion

In summary, Asanga's full-body approach (focusing on the field of the body and the fluctuations of prana related to respiration) is very similar to the shamatha practice of settling the mind in its natural state. The parallels between the two practices are quite profound. The settling the mind approach can trigger psychological "upheavals," which we observe, while "letting them be." The Asanga approach similarly triggers surges of energy and other somatic sensations that can also be viewed as upheavals. These are to be observed in the same way as the psychological upheavals of the settling the mind practice. In both cases the process enables the body and mind to balance itself, releasing knots and blockages.

THREE MINUTE BREATHING SPACE

*Adapted by Thupten Lekshe, from MBCT,
Segal, Williams and Teasdale, 2002,*

Introduction

This short practice is like the shape of an hour-glass, with three phases. In the first minute we begin with a wide focus of awareness, just tuning in to ourselves in the present moment. In the second minute we narrow the focus to the breath at the abdomen. And lastly, we expand out again with an awareness of the body and of the breath (see Fig 1).

Minute 1

*Tuning in
with expanded
awareness*

- Where am I?
- What is going on?
- What is my experience right now (thoughts, feelings, body sensations)?

Minute 2

*Gathering
awareness*

- Focus on the breath at the abdomen

Minute 3

*Expanding the
awareness*

- Focus on the breath and the body together

Learning this very simple practice gives us an extra tool for bringing mindfulness into every day life. We do the three minute practice formally by keeping to the time structure—just a minute for each phase. Use a recording if you wish or the timer on your smart phone. It is best to find a quiet spot and to sit in a formal erect fashion on a chair. You can do the practice even at work or in a park or in the car. You can set a goal for yourself and do the three minute practice a set number of times each day as a method of inspiration.

The three minute breathing space is very simple and takes even less time than brushing one's teeth so it forms a perfect bridge between longer formal meditation and everyday mindfulness.

Dealing with Difficult Situations

The three minute breathing space is also a useful tool for working with troublesome thoughts and feelings. Using this practice can be a helpful intervention when a situation seems to be getting the better of us. Taking a breathing space (no matter how brief) is the first step. It is a mini form of time-out. When we bring awareness to the breath we have a greater chance of acknowledging what is going on in the present moment. It may only be for a few breaths because of the circumstances at the time. However, with this awareness often comes a greater sense of choice about how to respond to the problem situation.

It is important to stress that the three minute breathing space is not just a way of gathering strength to fight back at troublesome thoughts and unpleasant feelings. Creating a whole new relationship to thoughts is not the same as answering them back. Challenging unhelpful thoughts can also be useful but that is not the strategy here. Learning to sit with emotions and thoughts is not the same as reacting to them or acting on the basis of them. The breathing space is like a door. Opening the door reveals a number of different ways to proceed. The critical thing is to become aware that there is choice.

Calming Space

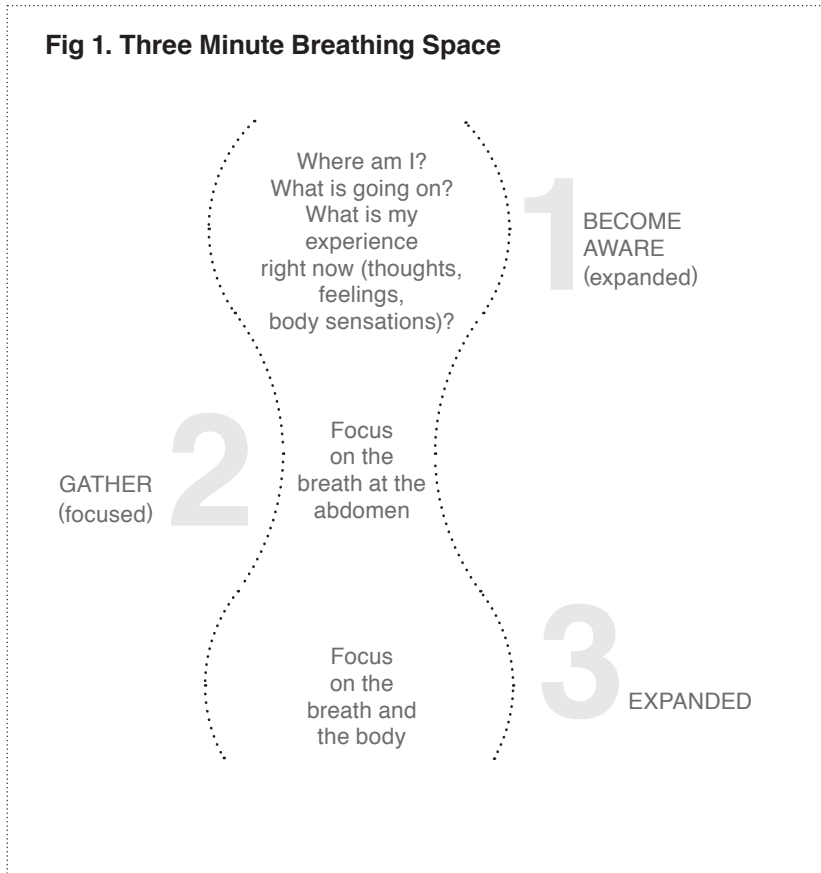
Another variation of the three minute breathing space is to change the process slightly and turn it into a calming space. With this process the intention in the second minute is to intentionally modulate the breath using counting.

Minute 2

Calming

- Let the breath come in slowly to count of three (1, 2, 3) and out (3,2,1)
- Extend gently to four (1, 2, 3, 4) and out to count of four (4, 3, 2, 1)
- Use the count to extend the breath each time a little
- Focus on the end of the out-breath

The three minute calming space can be very useful as a method for having mini “slow downs” or times to resettle the breath into a more healing rhythm.



SHAMATHA PRACTICE CHECKLIST

Introduction

Nowadays, using Guided Mindfulness Meditation (GMM) has become the new norm for learning how to meditate. There are myriad ways you can get access to GMM—apps, podcasts, sound recordings, and through a live teacher. There are, however, inherent problems with this form of learning.

Firstly, GMM is often treated as though it were the ideal form of practice. In fact, what is essential in meditation (at least according to the traditional contemplative traditions) is *solitary, un-led* practice. Secondly, GMM focuses on the mindfulness instructor and what the instructor can induce in the student rather than on what the student can discover through the practice. If mindfulness has a value in itself it should offer inner skills and qualities beyond the contextual and the interpersonal. When we use GMM as the primary and sole method for learning how to meditate, with interpersonal factors predominating, we can easily dilute the power of inner transformation.

Trainer Wheels

GMM can function as a useful training device, akin to using trainer wheels on a bicycle. Danger arises when students don't take the step of riding unaided. Without making this crucial transition we are stuck in the role of perpetual beginners. In the same way mindfulness meditation needs the practitioner to graduate from guided to self-guided practice. This is the mark of a true meditator—we can sit and work with our own mind without relying on external help.

Why a Checklist?

Acclaimed surgeon Atul Gawande in his 2011 best-seller, the Checklist Manifesto, gave a gripping account of the life-changing power of using short protocols to support highly skilled human endeavour. Low cost checklists have been used in health, engineering and in transport for decades and saved millions of lives. These checklists summarise the key components of a complex task. Shamatha meditation is just as transformative (and just as difficult) as flying

an airplane or conducting open-heart surgery. The practice involves refined mental processing that needs to be mastered with accuracy and consistency. Why not use checklists to increase the power and accuracy of shamatha?

The following shamatha checklists are designed to assist meditators in moving from guided to self-guided practice. Each shamatha practice is detailed with three key instructions that can be easily memorized. Meditators can use the checklist to ensure they are following the basic instructions. Over time these instructions become like second nature and are easily retrievable without any need for external guidance.

Beginning the Practice

Aspiration All practices begin with a brief orientation to one's most important personal aspiration for doing the practice. This imbues the meditation with an over arching quality of loving kindness and compassion.

Posture Briefly check the posture: stable base, palms down if sitting, (palms up if lying), straight back, shoulders relaxed, head slightly tilted forward, eyes half open, tongue on the palate.
(sitting or lying)

Calming Breath This can be used at the start (or occasionally during the practice) to settle/re-settle the attention onto the breath. Count on the in-breath (1, 2, 3); count on the out-breath (3, 2, 1); gently extend the count with each breath to the level of comfort.

Practice

1

Full Body Awareness

Establishing a ground of relaxation.

1. Release control of breath (release the out-breath, wait for the in-breath).
2. Roaming attention through the body—tune in to what is present in the body. Release any tension you discover with the out-breath.
3. Retain the level of alertness you started with (wake yourself when sleepy).

Practice

2

Abdomen

Stabilising the attention with more continuity.

1. Without at all controlling the breath, focus on the area of the abdomen and the manifestation of the breath there.
2. Follow the full cycle of the breath—all way out and at turning points.
3. Add the counting (or other variations) as needed, without becoming dependent.

Practice

3

Nostrils

Cultivating a clarity of attention.

1. Breath flows unimpeded—focus on sensations around the area of the nostrils or top lip.
2. Use counting as needed.
3. Check periodically tightness is not creeping in, drop back to the other breath practices if needed.

Practice

4

Asanga Breath practice

Maintaining a broad focus on the process of respiration.

1. With the breath still in its own rhythm, couple the awareness to the overall process of respiration, and let the breath guide and ground the awareness.
2. Become aware of breaths—long or short. Allow the natural process where breaths establish their own more and more subtle rhythm.
3. Be aware of whole breath, the movement of prana, holding the awareness in the present moment.

Practice

5

Settling the Mind—Taking the mind as the path.

Focussing on the space of the mind, letting mental events be as they are.

1. Locate the space of the mind—subtract five sense domains, focus on what remains or generate mental image/thought, wait for it to subside, keep focused on where it was.
2. Key instruction—“Focus on the space of the mind and whatever arises within that space without grasping and without distraction.”
3. Now letting mental events be as they are.

Practice

6

Awareness of Awareness—Shamatha without a sign.

Focussing on stillness whilst releasing any movement.

1. From awareness of the space of the mind invert the attention onto the very sense of awareness itself; stay focused on being aware that one is aware.
2. Variations—undulating, gentle vase breathing, slightly open mouth.
3. All the time releasing, similarly to mindfulness of the breath. We are settling into, discovering, the stillness of awareness.

Blended
Practices

Balancing Earth and Wind

- Sequential use of Full Body Awareness and Settling the Mind practice.

Balancing Earth and Sky

- Sequential use of Full Body Awareness and Awareness of Awareness practice.

Dzogchen Style Breath Practice

- A combination of the Asanga Breath practice and Awareness of Awareness. The breath rhythm is in the background (20%), awareness of awareness is in the foreground (80%).

PART II
READINGS

WHY PRACTICE?

By Ken McLeod

Like any artistic endeavour, meditation is a matter of practice.

“I’ve been meditating for some time, but my mind seems just as chaotic and confused as when I started. Am I doing something wrong?”

Almost everyone who practices meditation has similar concerns, no matter how long they’ve been doing it—whether three weeks, three years, or three decades. When students confront me with the progress question, I just try to redirect their attention. I’ve found that the best thing is for them to just keep practicing.

We call meditation “practice” for a reason. Any form of practice consists of doing something over and over again and failing at it over and over again. Through this process, we gradually build the capacities that make it possible to do what we are practicing. There is nothing special about meditation: like anything else, it’s a collection of skills.

Much of the confusion about meditation results from the fact that the different processes involved tend to get lumped together without clear differentiation. It’s as if in learning how to play the flute, we didn’t distinguish between blowing a long, sustained tone and a full round one, or between the skills of tonguing and fingering.

When it comes to meditation, some people are able to sit still without tension in their bodies; others are able to track the coming and going of the breath; yet others are able to open to everything they experience; and still others excel in clear and sharp focus, in visualization, and so on. There are many ways to practice meditation, but all of them involve a number of separate skills.

As with athletic or artistic endeavours, if we are serious about meditation, we spend a lot of time training in these basic skills. We don’t train in all the necessary skills at the same time; we train one, then another. It’s repetitious and not particularly exciting. But as we acquire competency and proficiency in each, we become capable of combining them in increasingly complex ways. Then things start to get interesting.

But even then, we can't expect success in every attempt. We are training, and because we know we are training, we need to be willing to learn from our failures. Every failure reveals what we lack in precision, strength, flexibility, resiliency, stamina, or dexterity.

We learn where our weaknesses are and how to compensate for or remedy them. And we also come to appreciate where our strengths are and how to build on them.

If we're learning to play a piece of music, we practice and practice and gradually it comes together. We become capable of holding sustained notes with good tone so that we can play the slower passages. Our fingers develop the flexibility and dexterity to handle the faster, more complex sections.

I may play lyrical pieces beautifully, but I may never be good at the kind of pyrotechnics needed for solo performances. And you may be able to bring out the passion and power in Beethoven, but miss the nuance in Satie's subtle duets with silence. And that's just how it is.

The apps, neuro-feedback devices, and other instruments to track various bodily and neurological states that have entered the spiritual marketplace may be helpful in developing and refining certain abilities. But it makes about as much sense to reduce meditation progress to such measurements as it does to reduce music to how long we can hold a sustained note or how quickly we can play a certain scale.

When it comes to meditation, we have to look at the different skills involved and figure out how to train in each of them.

Take mindfulness, for instance. It has attracted a lot of attention recently, but in terms of meditation skills, it's just one of many. If we regard the mind as a musical instrument, then mindfulness involves simply learning how to play in tune. That's very important—if we can't play in tune, nothing we play sounds good and other people probably won't want to play music with us—but even after mastering playing in tune, we still have to learn how to play actual melodies, to make real music. Mindfulness may be great for baroque, but when we discover the blues we find a whole new set of skills to learn. The same holds for meditation.

Then comes the question of commitment. Again, the similarities with music are striking. If we practice half an hour a day on a musical instrument, we will slowly learn how to play it. If we practice an hour or several hours a day, our skills will develop more quickly. On the other hand, if we practice too

much, we may burn out and be unable to learn at all. Thus, as with many other aspects of life, balance is important.

But why practice at all?

While there are well-documented benefits of meditation, approaching meditation for its particular benefits is very much like exercising to stay fit. It becomes a task, another thing to do. This is not the best approach. Frequently, it results in a not-so-subtle form of resentment that undermines the equanimity and ease necessary for effective practice.

Although meditation is now most frequently presented as something “good for us,” it is closer to an art form. Difficult and challenging, it requires a complex set of skills. And it takes time and effort to learn, let alone master.

Again, the parallels with music are interesting: we may sometimes resent the many hours we’ve had to put into practice, but the enjoyment we experience in playing music brings pleasure to us and to others throughout our lives.

If we take up meditation as we would any other artistic pursuit, it is unlikely we will have any regrets. Quite the contrary, the practice’s significance will grow and unfold throughout our lives.

Ken McLeod is the teacher and director of Unfettered Mind, which he established in Los Angeles in 1991. From Tricycle, March 2015.

THE ROLE OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL MEDITATION PRACTICE

By Thupten Lekshe, Melbourne, 2016

Sudden flashes of deep insight become possible.

Synergy

Formal mindfulness meditation can play a crucial role in the development of emotional resilience and practical wisdom. Informal, or everyday mindfulness can be seen as the outcome of what happens in the “training camp” of formal practice. More naturalistic experiences of mindfulness form a feedback loop into increased enthusiasm and understanding of the value of structured practice sessions. In this way a synergy develops between formal practice and the informal, free-style mindfulness of everyday life.

Sudden or Gradual?

Hui Neng was a poor kitchen assistant who became the Dharma successor of a great abbot. His promotion from lowly servant to abbot was on the basis of his deeper understanding of the Buddhist teachings. When asked to give a pithy, four-line instruction on the dharma, the smartest student in Hui Neng’s monastery offered the following—

*The body is a Bodhi Tree
The mind a mirror bright
At all times we strive to polish it
And let no dust alight.*

Hui Neng replied with his own famous stanza—

*Body is no Bodhi Tree
Nor mind a mirror bright.
Since all is inherently empty,
Where can dust alight?*

These two stanzas exemplify the key differences between two approaches to study and practice. The first is a gradual or developmental approach. Hui Neng

was sharing something more radical—what has been called the sudden or discovery mode of Buddhist practice. At a beginners level of understanding the two stanzas seem like opposing views, and certainly the tension between developmental and discovery modes has been played out in the history of Buddhism down through the ages. The great debate that set off the Tibetan tradition as a developmental approach is a key example. You can also see this in modern times in the so-called mindfulness movement. Teachers from one school will advertise for the benefits of mindfulness without meditation, whilst those in another will point to the research showing the neural benefits of regular and formal meditation.

Rather than thinking of this dichotomy as two distinct and irreconcilable positions, we can view them as an evolving process of understanding. They are not black and white opposites but two ways of looking at a path of awakening. They are both true depending on where one is travelling on the path.

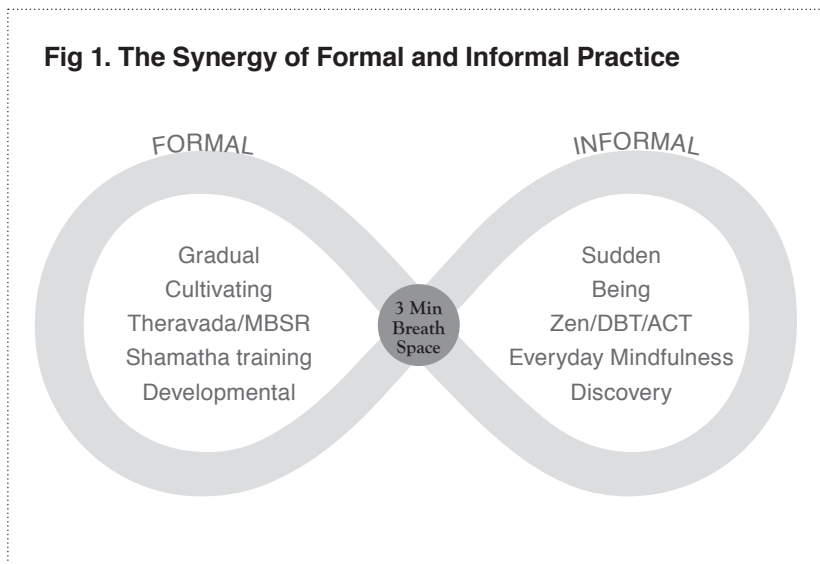
Two Complementary Approaches (Fig 1)

By immersing ourselves in practice we fail over and over, and with each failure our understanding grows and the possibility of deeper insight happens.

Insight then is not something we attain, but something we reveal when we “stop”. But “stopping” is invariably not the stopping we might imagine. The “doing mode” is an obsession with progress, with action, with evolution, with improvement and consumption. It is so deeply ingrained we rarely recognize the nagging sense of dissatisfaction it embodies. We don’t even see it as an obsession. In fact, for most of us “progress” is the defining characteristic of what makes us good or worthy. The blind spot we cannot see is that “doing” invariably becomes an expression of a mode of living that is trying to escape from the way things are. Anything less than progress, or self-improvement, or development, anything indigenous even, or sustainable, or harmonious, seems primitive, simplistic and undeveloped.

We need to see what we are doing first, repeatedly, over and over, and only then can we slowly begin to stop. When this happens the insight is already there, as though it has been waiting in the background. We need formal practice to reveal the possibility of more informal free style mindfulness, a direct experience of being. We need a gradual approach to reveal what was there all along. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of mental development shamatha (attention training) can be a sequence of stages that culminates in

a more open, free-style kind of mindfulness of being. As we master a greater stability of attention, sudden flashes of deep insight become possible. In other traditions an open kind of awareness is introduced earlier and this in turn can lead to more enthusiasm for a disciplined training of the mind.



Conclusion

This means that formal, regular meditation practice will be an important feature of learning about well-being and genuine happiness. But it is not the most important part. It is more of a preparation than an end-result. Ultimately what will really make the difference will be how lasting peace and happiness can be revealed to us in the midst of our everyday lives. This is not something we can manufacture or create. Slowly we will come to see that well-being is there right under our very noses.

Below is a list of formal practices. The bridge between the formal and the informal is the three minute breathing space. Over time the need for formal practice drops away. We find that more and more the space for “not doing” and “being” is revealed.

Key Formal Mindfulness Skills

1. Breath Awareness (4 formal breath practices).
2. Mindful Walking (formal and informal).
3. Mindful Stretching (formal and informal).
4. Three Minute Breathing Space (the bridge between formal and informal).

Mindfulness in Everyday Life

1. Waiting Mindfulness
(supermarket, bank queue, waiting rooms).
2. One-thing-at-a-time
(washing, eating, cleaning, listening).
3. Noble Silence.
4. Walking Mindfulness.
5. Mindful Stretching.

THE JOY OF EFFORT

By Thanissaro Bhikkhu

If you can approach difficulties with the enthusiasm with which an artist approaches challenges in her work, the discipline becomes enjoyable.

When explaining meditation, the Buddha often drew analogies with the skills of artists, carpenters, musicians, archers, and cooks. Finding the right level of effort, he said, is like a musician's tuning of a lute. Reading the mind's needs in the moment—to be gladdened, steadied, or inspired—is like a palace cook's ability to read and please the tastes of a prince.

Collectively, these analogies make an important point: meditation is a skill, and mastering it should be enjoyable in the same way mastering any other rewarding skill can be. The Buddha said as much to his son, Rahula: "When you see that you've acted, spoken, or thought in a skillful way—conducive to happiness while causing no harm to yourself or others—take joy in that fact and keep on training."

Of course, saying that meditation should be enjoyable doesn't mean that it will always be easy or pleasant. Every meditator knows that it requires serious discipline to sit with long, unpleasant stretches and untangle all the mind's difficult issues. But if you can approach difficulties with the enthusiasm with which an artist approaches challenges in her work, the discipline becomes enjoyable. Problems are solved through your own ingenuity, and the mind is energized for even greater challenges.

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To begin, simply notice when the breath is long and when it's short. In the remaining steps, though, you train yourself. In other words, you have to figure out for yourself how to do what the Buddha recommends. The first two trainings are to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body, then to calm the effect that the breath has on the body. How do you do that? You experiment. What rhythm of breathing, what way of conceiving the breath calms its effect on

the body? Try thinking of the breath not as the air coming in and out of the lungs but as the energy flow throughout the body that draws the air in and out. Where do you feel that energy flow? Think of it as flowing in and out the back of your neck, in your feet and hands, along the nerves and blood vessels, in your bones. Think of it coming in and out every pore of your skin. Where is it blocked? How do you dissolve the blockages? By breathing through them? Around them? Straight into them? See what works.

*Extracted from a longer article in the Summer
2008 edition of Tricycle Magazine.*

SPACE IN THE MIND

By Ajahn Sumedho

The important thing is not to get rid of thought, but to understand it. We do this by concentrating on the space in the mind, rather than on the thought.

In meditation, we can be alert and attentive; it's like listening. What we are doing is just bringing into awareness the way it is, noticing space and form. For example, we can notice space in a room. Most people probably wouldn't notice the space; they would notice the things in it—the people, the walls, the floor, the furniture. But in order to notice the space, what do we do? We withdraw our attention from the things and bring our attention to the space. This does not mean getting rid of things, or denying the things their right to be there. It merely means not concentrating on them, not going from one thing to another.

The space in a room is peaceful. The objects in the room can excite, repel, or attract, but the space has no such quality. However, even though the space does not attract our attention, we can be fully aware of it, and we become aware of it when we are no longer absorbed by the objects in the room. When we reflect on the space in the room, we feel a sense of calm because all space is the same; the space around you and the space around me is no different. It is not mine. I can't say "This space belongs to me" or "That space belongs to you."

Space is always present. It makes it possible for us to be together, contained within a room, in a space that is limited by walls. Space is also outside the room; it contains the whole building, the whole world. So space is not bound by objects in any way; it is not bound by anything. If we wish, we can view space as limited in a room, but really, space is unlimited.

Noticing the space around people and things provides a different way of looking at them, and developing this spacious view is a way of opening oneself. When one has a spacious mind, there is room for everything. When one has a narrow mind, there is room for only a few things. Everything has to be manipulated and controlled; the rest is just to be pushed out.

Life with a narrow view is suppressed and constricted; it is a struggle. There is always tension involved in it, because it takes an enormous amount of energy

to keep everything in order all the time. If you have a narrow view of life, the disorder of life has to be ordered for you, so you are always busy manipulating the mind and rejecting things or holding on to them. This is the *dukkha* of ignorance, which comes from not understanding the way it is.

The spacious mind has room for everything. It is like the space in a room, which is never harmed by what goes in and out of it. In fact, we say “the space in this room,” but actually, the room is in the space, the whole building is in the space. When the building has gone, the space will still be there. The space surrounds the building, and right now we are containing space in a room. With this view we can develop a new perspective. We can see that there are walls creating the shape of the room, and there is the space. Looking at it one way, the walls limit the space in the room. But looking at it another way, we see that space is limitless.

We can apply this perspective to the mind, using the “I” consciousness to see space as an object. In the mind we can see that there are thoughts and emotions—the mental conditions that arise and cease. Usually, we are dazzled, repelled, or bound by these thoughts and emotions. We go from one thing to another, reacting, controlling, manipulating, or trying to get rid of them. So we never have any perspective in our lives. We become obsessed with either repressing or indulging in these mental conditions; we are caught in these two extremes.

With meditation we have the opportunity to contemplate the mind. The silence of the mind is like the space in a room. Take the simple sentence “I am” and begin to notice, contemplate, and reflect on the space around those two words. Rather than looking for something else, sustain attention on the space around the words. Look at thinking itself, really examine and investigate it. Now, you can’t watch yourself habitually thinking, because as soon as you notice that you’re thinking, the thinking stops. You might be going along worrying, “I wonder if this will happen. What if that happens? Oh, I’m thinking,” and it stops.

To examine the thinking process, deliberately think something: take just one ordinary thought, such as “I am a human being,” and just look at it. If you look at the beginning of it, you can see that just before you say “I,” there is a kind of empty space. Then, if you think in your mind, “I—am—a—human—being,” you will see space between the words. We are not looking at thought to see whether we have intelligent thoughts or stupid ones. Instead, we are

deliberately thinking in order to notice the space around each thought. This way, we begin to have a perspective on the impermanent nature of thinking.

That is just one way of investigating so that we can notice the emptiness when there is no thought in the mind. Try to focus on that space; see if you can concentrate on that space before and after a thought. For how long can you do it? Think, “I am a human being,” and just before you start thinking it, stay in that space just before you say it. Now that’s mindfulness, isn’t it? Your mind is empty, but there is also an intention to think a particular thought. Then think it, and at the end of the thought, try to stay in the space at the end. Does your mind stay empty?

Most of our suffering comes from habitual thinking. If we try to stop it out of aversion to thinking, we can’t; we just go on and on and on. So the important thing is not to get rid of thought, but to understand it. And we do this by concentrating on the space in the mind, rather than on the thought.

Our minds tend to get caught up with thoughts of attraction or aversion to objects, but the space around those thoughts is not attractive or repulsive. The space around an attractive thought and a repulsive thought is not different, is it? Concentrating on the space between thoughts, we become less caught up in our preferences concerning the thoughts. So if you find that an obsessive thought of guilt, self-pity, or passion keeps coming up, then work with it in this way—deliberately think it, really bring it up as a conscious state, and notice the space around it.

It’s like looking at the space in a room: you don’t go looking for the space, do you? You are simply open to it, because it is here all the time. It is not anything you are going to find in the cupboard or in the next room, or under the floor—it is here right now. So you open to its presence; you begin to notice that it is here.

Adapted for Tricycle (May 2, 2015) from Ajahn Sumedho’s book, “The Mind and the Way.”

A VAST AND CALM MIND

By Matthieu Ricard

The first thing you have to do is let the water settle until it becomes clear.

In order to recognize the fundamental nature of the mind, we have to remove the veils created by automatic thought patterns. How do we do that? Suppose you are trying to retrieve a key that has fallen into a pond. If you poke about on the bottom with a stick, you'll completely muddy the water and won't have the slightest chance of spotting the key. The first thing you have to do is let the water settle until it becomes clear. After that, it will be easy to see the key and pick it up. We must work with our mind in the same way. We have to begin by making it clear, calm, and attentive. After that, we can use this new skill to cultivate other qualities, such as altruistic love and compassion, as well as to develop a deeper insight into the nature of mind.

Most of the time our mind is unstable, disorderly, and driven by whims as it bounces back and forth between hope and fear. It is self-centered, hesitant, fragmented, confused, and sometimes even absent, as well as weakened by internal contradictions and a feeling of insecurity. It rebels against any kind of training and is constantly occupied by a stream of inner chatter that generates a constant background noise we are barely aware of. Because these dysfunctional states are nothing but products of the mind itself, it makes sense that the mind can also remedy them.

So the idea is to gradually progress from a state of mind where unfavourable conditions prevail, to another state that is characterized by stable attention, inner peace and clarity, confidence, courage, openness toward others, benevolence, the ability to deal with emotions, and other qualities of a vast and calm mind.

Extracted from Why Meditate? Working with Thoughts and Emotions, 2010.

MOTIVATIONS AND DEDICATIONS

METTA—Loving-Kindness

Motivation

I'm sitting here and doing this practice to learn about my mind, to find some peace and well-being in my life. By doing this practice may I be well and happy, and may I inspire this also in others.

Dedication

Having done this practice today, having made the effort, no matter how small the benefit, thinking now how good it would be if I could offer this to someone I love. How good it would be if they too could benefit from greater peace of mind. So with this wish on my mind, I am dedicating this practice for the welfare of others.

KARUNA—Compassion

Motivation

I come here to this practice aware of the suffering of myself and others. May this meditation support and nourish my ability and my willingness to face and transform the suffering in the world. By training my mind may I nourish my care with wisdom and an open heart.

Dedication

I've done this practice to cultivate my best qualities so as to be of benefit to myself and to the world. By practicing like this may I be able to recognize and face suffering wherever I find it. May I find the strength and the courage to continue to care. May I do my best to relieve suffering in whatever ways I can, no matter how small or big.

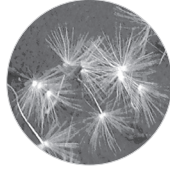
GREAT Compassion

General dedication

By doing this practice may
I become free of suffering.
May I be well and happy,
And may others too be free and happy.
How wonderful it would be if this was so,
May I make it so,
May I receive support to make it so.

Food dedication

With sincere devotion
I offer this carefully prepared food,
Which pleases the mind
with a hundred tastes,
To all those who help me on the path,
May all living beings be sustained
by the abundant food of meditation.
Om Ah Hum,
Om Ah Hum,
Om Ah Hum.



Dedication:

May this compilation of practices and commentaries contribute to the spread of loving-kindness and compassion in the world.