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The Meditative Art of Attention

Meditative attention is an art, or an acquired skill which brings clarity and an intelligence that sees the ‘true nature of things’. Among the variety of techniques in Buddhist meditation, the art of attention is the common thread underpinning all schools of Buddhist meditation: Mahamudra in the Tibetan tradition, Zazen in Zen Buddhism and Vipassana meditation in Theravada. Its ubiquitousness is illustrated by this Zen story: A monk once asked his teacher, ‘What is the fundamental teaching in Buddhism?’ the Master replied ‘Attention’. The student, dissatisfied with the answer said, ‘I wasn’t asking about attention, but was wanting to know the essential teaching in Buddhism’. The Master replied, ‘Attention, Attention, Attention’. So, it can be appreciated that the essence of Buddhist practice is to be found in the word - *attention!*

But how to do it? What is the practice? Vague advice to an aspiring meditator, such as ‘be mindful’ or ‘be attentive’, while offered with good intention, is unlikely to be effective. It is like the rulers in Aldous Huxley’s utopian novel *Island* who taught mynah birds to repeat ‘attention’ in the hope of training the island inhabitants to be attentive — it just didn’t work. To recognize the fact that most of us tend to function in a rather inattentive, unfocused way, which results in a rather superficial experience of life, is to see the necessity for training the errant attention in a systematic way, under guidance.

This trained attention has the effect of uncovering, or laying bare, things as they really are. It is the ‘primary’ attention that sees through the ‘content’ mind to the underlying processes. In

laying bare the reality of psychophysical phenomena, the salient characteristics are revealed without interfering with them. The art of this ‘bare’ attention is to simply register the predominant object in one’s experience as it arises without preference or interference, as a witness. That is, just registering or noting the changing phenomenon without reaction — be it sensation, sound, thought or a mind-state. However, if there is a reaction during the observation, as is natural for the untrained mind, then that too must be noted. This way of seeing has the potential to uncover the true nature of the phenomenon observed and thus a non-reactive, unconditioned awareness is acquired that brings liberating ‘inseeing’ or insight knowledge.

An Orientation to the Six Sense Doors

Being attentive is not a practice that needs to be confined to a crossed-legged posture. Meditative attention is a dynamic practice of paying close attention to what you are doing in whatever posture or situation you happen to be in. The way to orientate yourself in this practice is to literally ‘come to your senses’. That is, a strategy of being fully aware of all your activities through a conscious orientation to the five senses and the ‘sixth sense’ — the mind. The Six Sense Doors is the name for the five physical senses: eye, ear, nose, tongue and body and the sixth sense, which is a collective term for the five kinds of consciousness: eye-consciousness, ear-consciousness, etc. So, the practice is to be consciously attentive at the predominant door or sense base. For example, being on guard at the eye-door allows you to notice the effects of the contact between the eye and the visible objects and how you are relating to them. This orientation to any sense door

brings awareness of what is happening during any sense impression and with it the ability to monitor the associated feelings and consciousness that arise.

The actual meaning of ‘attention’ indicates its practice: ‘to attend upon’, ‘to be present with’. By being attentive ‘presence of mind’ is developed. While there are degrees of attention (down to lack of attention), it can be said that there are two types: natural attention, which is ‘automated attention’ and the intentionally ‘deployed’ attention that is developed in ‘meditative attention’.

Deployed attention is either passive, or in the sense of being applied, active. The passive mode is ‘bare attention’, that is just registering what is happening, in a receptive state of mind, without reaction. The active mode of attention is applied when any kind of movement or action is done, including active reflective thought on things observed.

Try this Exercise in Orientating to a Sense-Door

Check! Where is your attention at this present moment? What sense impression is predominant now? Is it the eye-door as you view the page, the ear-door attracted by sounds or the touch sensations of the body’s contact on the chair you’re sitting on. *This moment* is the time to establish the habit of being consciously present at a sense door and notice what is happening during a sense impression.

Choose a sense-door and be attentive to what is happening there. What feeling is present; what is the quality of that

feeling; is it pleasant, unpleasant or neutral? What thoughts are associated with it? Take particular notice of the changes. It is useful to make a habit of checking yourself during your daily routine: what sense door am I at; what is happening there; what are the associated feelings that arise?

Dependent origination

This strategy of being present at a sense-door ties in with the practical application and study of Dependent Origination, *Pattica Samupada*. As you experience the series of causal events, you can intercept them at the linkage of either consciousness, sense impression and/or feeling. The ability to do this gives you the potential to be free of the conditioned cycle of suffering that most people are unknowingly trapped in.

The Law of Dependent Origination is a profound subject, it is the very essence of the Buddha's Teachings, illustrated by a famous exchange between the Buddha and his personal attendant, Ananda. Ananda casually remarked that he thought it was an easy thing to understand. The Buddha responded by saying, 'Not so Ananda, don't ever say such a thing. It's because people do not understand origination, that they are not able to penetrate it, that their minds are befuddled. Just as a ball of twine becomes all tangled up and knotted, just so are beings ensnared and unable to free themselves from the wheel of existence, the conditions of suffering and states of hell and ruin'.

We can untangle the tangle by 'insighting' into dependent origination through *awareness at a sense door*. What we are

experiencing now is the result of a series of events that arose because of previous conditions and is linked as a causal chain of effects, i.e. as cyclic existence.

It is useful to have a working knowledge of the eleven links in the cycle of Dependent Origination. Even such theoretical knowledge will point you in the right direction and the potential to be free of the conditioning it causes:

1. With **Ignorance** as a condition Karmic Formations or Volitional Actions arise;
2. With **Volitional Actions** as a condition Consciousness arises;
3. With **Consciousness** as a condition Mentality/Materiality arises;
4. With **Mentality/Materiality** as a condition the Six Sense Bases arise;
5. With **The Six Sense Bases** as a condition Contact (sense impressions) arise;
6. With **Sense Impressions** as a condition Feelings (*vedana*) arise;
7. With **Feelings** as a condition Grasping arises;
8. With **Grasping** as a condition Clinging arises;
9. With **Clinging** as a condition Attachment arises;
10. With **Attachment** as a condition Becoming arises;
11. With **Becoming** as a condition Pain, old age and death arise, i.e. conditioned suffering.

Here is the enlightenment story of Bahiya, the wooden robed one, who was able to practise in this way. Bahiya, originally a merchant, was travelling at sea with all his merchandise and was shipwrecked and cast ashore naked. He found bark to cover himself and an old bowl, and he went searching for alms-food. The local people were impressed by his seeming austerities and his reputation as an ascetic grew. He was tested when people offered him fine robes, but knowing that they would lose faith in him if he accepted, he refused, keeping up the deception. Bahiya was installed in a temple and worshipped as an Arahant (an Enlightened One) so that in time he came to believe that he was actually an enlightened being.

He lived impeccably and gained good concentration powers. Sitting in meditation one day, it is said that a deva, who was a former blood-relation, was able to persuade Bahiya that he wasn't really enlightened at all and that he should go and see the Buddha, an Arahant who could help him.

Bahiya made a long journey to visit the Buddha at Savatti and reached the monastery just as the Buddha was about to go on the daily alms-round. Bahiya asked the Buddha three times to teach him the Dharma before the Buddha agreed to teach at such an inopportune time.

The Buddha then gave these brief instructions: 'Bahiya, you should train yourself in this way:

With the seen, there will be *just the seen*; with the heard, there will be *just the heard*; with the sensed (touched, tasted, smelt) there will be *just the sensed*; with the cognized, there will be *just the cognized*.

When for you, Bahiya, there is merely the seen, heard, sensed and cognized, then you will not be therein. Then you, Bahiya, will be neither here nor there nor within both — this is itself the end of suffering.’

Through this brief instruction, Bahiya was immediately Enlightened — through non-clinging — thus becoming an Arahant.

Not long after the Buddha had departed, Bahiya was fatally gored by a cow. When the Buddha returned from his alms-round and found Bahiya dead, he arranged for his cremation and for a stupa to be built for him. When asked what the destiny of Bahiya was the Buddha said that because he had grasped the meditation subject in the teacher’s presence, and practised as instructed according to the Dharma, Bahiya had attained Parinibbana, final Enlightenment.

The Technique of Mental Noting

A useful device to support meditative attention is naming or labelling the various objects during the observation of your own body and mind. Used judiciously, it is a very useful tool for focusing and sustaining the attention. The noting is done by repeatedly making a mental note of whatever arises in your body/mind experience. For example, ‘hearing’, ‘hearing’, ‘thinking’, ‘thinking’, ‘touching’, ‘touching’, etc. This is a powerful aid to help establish bare attention, especially at the beginning of the practice, when it is vital to systematically note or label as much as possible to establish the attention. Otherwise, you are likely to get lost in unnoticed wanderings with long periods of inattention. Having succeeded, even

partially, in sustaining the attention, then the mental noting can be dropped, especially if the noting has become mechanical or is so clumsy that it is interfering with the subtle attention. Having acquired the ability to monitor your experience with just bare attention, you will need to return to the mental noting only when the attention weakens, is lost or needs to be re-established. The mental noting can be combined with the practice of orientating to your sense impressions by the naming of the physical and mental objects as they arise at the six sense doors. Be careful not to analyse what is being observed, just register or note it without reaction.

The Four Spheres of Attention

The four spheres of attention are structures or frames of reference used to support the practice. They are based on the Satipatthana Sutta and can be used as guidelines or frames of reference to help you direct the attention as you investigate the various experiences in your body and mind.

1. Attention to the Body

Directed to apprehending the primary elements of the body (earth, air, fire and water) i.e., hardness, softness, temperature, fluidity and movement within the body and/or awareness of the various body postures, movements and actions in daily activities.

2. Attention to Feelings or Sensations

Noting the qualities of feelings as either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral while being careful to differentiate the primary feeling from the emotional story.

3. Attention to the Consciousness and Mind-States

The consciousness is the '*knowing*' of anything, eg. a physical sensation and the knowing of it. Particular attention is paid to the mind-states, eg. happiness, sadness, agitation and seeing their arising and passing away.

4. Attention to the Mental Content

This is not analysing mental events or classifying them, but using the attention to passively register the things of the mind — thoughts, ideas and concepts — as a witness without commentary.

The Two Modes of Meditation

There are two modes of meditation: Calm (*Samatha*) and Insight (*Vipassana*). Calming or serenity meditations use techniques of 'fixing' on a single object, excluding all other objects, to produce calm and one-pointedness. Examples are techniques using visualisation, following the respiration, mantras and contemplation. The second meditation mode is made up of practices that develop awareness. That is, paying close attention to the predominant object in your physical and mental experience with moment-to-moment awareness. This meditative attention will lead to insight knowledge.

The ability to successfully manage yourself in meditation depends on whether you can make appropriate adjustments or ‘fine tuning’ during a practice session. This ability is based on understanding these two modes of meditation: for example, if you become strained or tense during insight meditation, switching to the serenity meditation mode will calm and relax the mind; or if you became stuck in a becalmed mind-state in serenity meditation, you can invigorate the mind with an awareness exercise to give it an investigative edge.

Three-fold Strategy of Practice

It is necessary to appreciate the nature of ‘practice’ as applied to meditation because it could mistakenly be taken to imply the notion of control. This is far from the case, as the meditator needs to have a flowing receptivity to the experience without in any way controlling it. So ‘discipline’ in the meditation context can be misunderstood as imposing one’s will to control the practice. Actually, it is no more than following the directions and persistently applying the instructions with sensitivity. So *correct* practice is repeated performance to develop skills, without controlling or interfering with the experience. It’s developmental — the way to growth!

It is important at the beginning of the practice to notice how you are relating to your experience or what your attitude to it is. If it happens to be reactive or judgmental then it is necessary to change the way you relate to things, situations or people, by cultivating qualities of acceptance, empathy and of ‘letting go’. Being more accepting and allowing, without the

struggle to gain something, creates a natural meditative state that facilitates the practice.

To successfully self-manage your practice it is necessary to take a holistic approach and to work within a supportive structure. Such a system is found in the ‘Three-fold Strategy of Practice’, which is a complete and integrated system supportive of the psychological wellbeing of the practitioner:

1. Restraint of behaviour in order to harmonise relationships;
2. Recollectedness, especially regarding developing the meditative art of ‘focusing’;
3. Discernment, which is the wisdom that sees the true nature of mind and existence.

Restraint and Harmony

Traditionally the meditator must formally undertake, or accept, five rules of conduct as a prerequisite for meditation. They are the foundations that good practice is based on, without them good concentration cannot be attained. These restraints need to be considered and accepted, as they act as protectors for your well-being on the meditation path: 1) to refrain from harming or taking life; 2) to refrain from taking what is not given; 3) to refrain from the misuse of the senses; 4) to refrain from false and harsh speech; and 5) **to refrain from** the taking of intoxicants which confuse the mind. This is the ethical underpinning of the threefold system. But they are not to be considered as mere ‘no-nos’ as they are balanced by

the cultivation of positive behaviour: honesty, generosity, kindness, and so on.

Recollectedness

The quality of recollectedness or full awareness is acquired through the development and the managing of three meditation skills: *Right Effort*, *Right Attention* and *Right Concentration*. Effort is right in the sense of arousing, sustaining and balancing the effort; meditative attention is right when there is close and impartial attention to the various meditation objects as they arise; concentration is right when it centres upon and intensifies the meditative focus. Too much effort makes the mind restless; not enough makes the mind slack; too much concentration restricts the awareness, not enough and the mind loses its focus; but there can never be too much attentiveness, as the acuity of attention is the factor which will deepen the practice. The successful managing of these meditation skills will produce mindfulness or presence of mind, the prerequisite for a finely tuned discernment.

Discernment and Insight

Discernment is the intelligence that uncovers the true nature of things by seeing through the ‘content’ mind to the underlying processes. It is based upon a non-reactive awareness, a perfectly attuned attitude and a penetrative attentiveness that has the potential to see ‘what really is’. The outcome of such practice is direct experiential knowledge of the three universal characteristics of existence: *change*, *unsatisfactoriness* and

impersonal process which culminates in a series of insights freeing one's view from the distortions caused by ignorance.

Three-fold Strategy and Mental Impurities

Mental impurities are said to be present in three stratified layers in the mind: 1) dormant 2) manifest and 3) expressed. These impurities, or the three poisons of greed, hatred and ignorance, can be dealt with in three ways: first their expression can be restrained by harmonising one's behaviour; secondly, when they manifest in the mind, for example as angry thoughts, then they can be skilfully suppressed through concentration practices in serenity meditation; eventually when they are seen at their primary source or dormant level then they can be eradicated through insight meditation.

Here's an example of how the three-fold strategy is used to deal with our most troublesome negative emotion — anger. First, restrain your behaviour in a situation where anger arises, thus not giving it a chance to be expressed; as soon as anger surfaces in the mind as negative thoughts then a serenity meditation technique will calm the anger in the mind. But it is only through insight meditation where the ego-illusion is seen at its primary source, as the notion of 'me' and 'mine', that the anger at the dormant level can be seen with the possibility of eradicating it at its source.

The Three Meditation Practices

- 1. Sitting Meditation** — where the primary focus is on the elements of the body while switching to the other spheres of attention as they arise.
- 2. Walking Meditation** — where the stepping or foot movements in walking are noted in detail and the attention is focused on the movements as the primary object.
- 3. Daily Activities** — the meditator continually labels body movements and actions.

Linking these three aspects of practice together will create an unbroken thread of awareness throughout the day, either generally, or as the practice becomes fluent, a precise and detailed noting of every action and movement can be sustained.

Instruction for Sitting Meditation

The first step is to find a balanced sitting posture. You should be relaxed yet your spine should be straight — you may have noticed how a 5-year-old sits up in a balanced way without effort. Allow your head to balance freely on the spine, checking that it is not pulled back or fixed. Allow your chin to drop so that your eyes and ears are at about the same level.

If sitting on the floor, use cushion(s) so that your knees are below your hips and in contact with the floor (otherwise your spine will collapse) or else use a chair with a firm base (not a sofa). Slumping only increases the pressure on the legs and discomfort in the back. Try radiating loving-kindness above

and below and in all directions around you to check that you are not holding or contracting in the front or the back, etc. Check that your breathing is free and easy —any restriction indicates a fixed posture. Turn your awareness to the parts of your body which contact the cushion, ground or chair, softening onto the supporting surfaces.

It is useful to spend 5 minutes scanning the body in this way. Note that there is no such thing as ‘perfect posture’ and postural aches will come and go as a natural part of the unfolding practice. If pain becomes overwhelming or is due to injury, mindfully adjust the posture after noting the various sensations. However, as concentration develops, sensations of hotness, stiffness and itchiness will arise as part of the contemplation of feeling and sensation, and it is important to note them mindfully without fidgeting.

It is important to attend to your posture with wisdom, not insensitive will-power. Posture will improve with time, but you need to work *with* the body, not use force *against* it. If you have a lot of pain during a period of sitting, change posture, sit on a small stool or chair, or stand up for a while.

Checking your posture

Are the hips leaning back? This will cause a slump.

The small of the back should retain its natural, unforced curve so that the abdomen is forward and ‘open’.

Imagine that someone is gently pushing between the shoulder blades, but keep the muscles relaxed.

Note, and gently release, any tension in the neck/shoulder region.

Once you have settled into a comfortable, upright, balanced position you can begin meditating. On the basis of working from the gross to the subtle, i.e. from the body to the mind, feel the touch sensations of hardness or softness from the body's contact with the ground or chair (*earth element*). This will help to anchor the attention to the body, especially when assisted by the mental label of 'touching'. Then tune into the natural rising and falling movement of the lower abdomen, making a mental note or label of 'rising', 'rising' concurrent with the upward movement and 'falling', 'falling' with the downward movement.

Having established the movement of the abdomen as a base be wary of clinging to it. If any secondary objects arise, such as thinking, sensations or mind-states they too must be noted until they disappear. Then if nothing else takes your attention return to noting the rising and falling movement of the abdomen as your primary object, but always be prepared to attend to the secondary objects when they arise.

It is important to be alert to the specific characteristics of the various elements under observation, eg. the series of sensations from the movement of the abdomen (*wind element*) or the specific characteristics found in pain such as heat, throbbing, etc (*fire element*). The traditional sitting posture gives the right environmental conditions and allows you to focus intensely and apprehend, at a microscopic level, the body's elements and the subtle mind events.

Technique in Walking Meditation

While meditation is usually associated with the sitting posture, Insight meditation (*Vipassana*) exercises can be practised while walking. Walking in Insight meditation is essentially about the awareness of movement as you note the component parts of the steps. Alternating walking meditation with sitting meditation helps to keep the meditation practice in balance.

Walking meditation is also a skilful way to energise the practice if the calming effect of sitting is making you dull or you are becoming over concentrated. Actually, it can be the preferred mode in Insight meditation as it is *meditation in action*.

You will need to find a level surface from five to ten metres long on which you can walk back and forth. Your arms should hang naturally with your hands lightly clasped in front. Gaze at a point about two metres in front of you on the ground to avoid visual distractions. Establish your attentiveness by first noting the standing posture and the touch sensation of the feet at the start of the walking track. Then as you walk keep the attention on the sole of the foot, not on the leg or any other part of the body.

For the first five minutes you can note just three parts of each step: ‘lifting’, ‘pushing’, ‘dropping’. Mentally note or label each step part by part, building up so that you are noting all six component parts: ‘raising’, ‘lifting’, ‘pushing’, ‘dropping’, ‘touching’ and ‘pressing’ — concurrent with the actual experience of the movements.

While walking and noting the parts of the steps you will probably find the mind still thinking. Not to worry, keep

focused on the noting of the steps, so long as the thoughts remain just ‘background thoughts’. However, if you find you have been walking ‘lost in thought’ you must stop and vigorously note the thinking as ‘thinking’, ‘thinking’, ‘thinking’. Then re-establish your attention on the movement and carry on. Be careful that the mental noting does not become so mechanical that you lose the experience of the movement.

Try to do a minimum walking period of half an hour and build it up to a full hour. Strategically it is better to do a walking period before a sitting session as it brings balance into the practice. If you can alternate the walking and sitting sessions without any major breaks you will develop a continuity of awareness that naturally carries through into the awareness of daily activities.

Awareness of Daily Activities

Those who see worldly life as an obstacle to Dhamma see no Dhamma in everyday actions: They have not discovered that there are no everyday actions outside of Dhamma.

— Eihei Dogen.

For awareness to deepen, continuity, which gives momentum to the practice, must be maintained for at least a few hours in the day. Continuity arises through careful and precise attention to movements, actions, feelings and mind-states, whatever is prominent, for as long as possible during the routine of the day.

Nothing can be dismissed as unimportant when noting daily activities: domestic chores, eating, cleaning your teeth. Repeatedly note any and every movement and activity in order to establish the habit so that it becomes second nature to note them in your daily routine. Of course, this is not easy to establish and so requires patience and perseverance — especially in being kind to yourself when you feel frustrated by constant forgetfulness!

If you are having difficulty, set yourself up to do a daily mindfulness exercise using a ‘trigger’ as a reminder. For instance, you could use contact with water as a trigger to remind you to be present with whatever you are doing while you are doing it, for instance washing your hands, doing the dishes, hosing the garden, washing the dog, etc. If you succeed only once in paying full attention it might be the start of establishing the habit of being mindful.

It is helpful to reinforce your efforts in being attentive in daily life by reviewing or taking stock of your daily notings — but without making judgements — and recording your practice in a meditation diary.

Awareness of Feelings

The Buddha said, ‘all things converge in feelings’. Awareness of feelings is the pivotal factor in meditation. A lot of difficulties in meditation practice stem from the unnoticed or unacknowledged reaction to unpleasant feelings. We spend most of our lives in unceasing effort to increase pleasant feelings and to avoid unpleasant feelings. If we do not acknowledge feelings they linger and we become stuck in

some state — positive or negative. Yet feeling by itself, in its primary state, is quite neutral when it simply registers the impact of an object as pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent. Only when there are emotional additions, such as when one's personal story is involved, will there arise fear, hatred and anxiety. Feelings and emotions are *separable*. Many of the weaker impressions we receive during the day stop at the mere registering of faint and brief feelings. This shows that the stopping at the bare or primary feeling is psychologically possible.

Attention to feelings, even when they are faint and brief, can be sustained throughout the day when the mind is calm and alert, because actually there are many occasions when one is not totally preoccupied and is able to notice feelings clearly at their primary stage. If, however, you are unable at first to differentiate the feelings, as a strategy try asking yourself a checking question: 'what feeling is present?'. In this way, you can sort out the jumble of confused feelings usually present.

It is of particular importance to dissociate the feelings from even the slightest thought of 'I' or 'mine'. There should be no ego-reference such as 'I feel' nor should there be any thought of being the owner of the feeling: 'I have pleasant feelings or I have pain' but rather 'There are pleasant feelings' or 'There is pain'. Awareness of feeling without the ego-reference allows the meditator to keep the attention focused on the feeling alone. This is the meaning in the Satipattana Sutta of 'He contemplates feeling in feeling'.

You should first develop an awareness of the feelings when they arise, clearly distinguishing them as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. With attentiveness there is no such thing as mixed feelings. Attention should be maintained throughout the short

duration of the specific feeling until the feeling ends. If the vanishing point of feeling is repeatedly seen with increasing clarity it will become much easier to catch and finally to stop thoughts and emotions which normally follow so regularly and are habitually linked: if the feeling is unpleasant a negative reaction occurs; if it's pleasant grasping arises. Thus the mind is mostly just reacting: liking, disliking. The result is that you are being caught in the conditioned cycle of suffering at the linkage of feelings and grasping. But there is no need to be. By intercepting the primary feeling at a sense-door, without the following emotion, the feeling will go no further, therefore no attachments, no liking or disliking, end of story, end of suffering.

When 'bare' attention, that is, registering the feeling without reaction in a state of receptivity, is directed to the rising and vanishing of feelings, the polluting additions are held at bay and inhibited from further elaboration. So gradually the gross feelings weaken and fall away — one loses interest — thus dispassion arises, which is a natural, effortless 'letting go'.

The Buddha likens feelings to bubbles. If feelings can be seen in their bubble-like, blown-up and bursting nature their linkage with grasping and attachment will be weakened more and more until the chain is finally broken. Through this practice, attachment, which is a kind of stuckness to feelings, will be skilfully eliminated. This does not mean that this practice will lead to cold aloofness or an emotional withdrawal. On the contrary, mind and heart will become more open and free from the fever of clinging. Out of this seeing, an inner space will be provided for the growth of the finer emotions: loving-kindness, compassion, patience and forbearance.

Achieving Balance in Meditation

An image often used to describe the practice of meditative attention is that of walking a tightrope. To succeed in this art you must pay attention to your balance. In meditation, this applies especially to how you relate to things — your attitude. The untrained mind is constantly reaching out to pull at desirable objects or pushing away unpleasant objects. The habit of pushing and pulling is the cause of much distress and imbalance. So keeping your balance will help to develop a mind that does not cling or reject, like or dislike, and is without attachment or condemnation.

Developing the ability to adjust and manage your effort in practice is essential. A certain effort is involved in developing moment-to-moment awareness, but it should not be an effort to attain anything in the future. The effort should focus on the present, just paying attention with equanimity to what is happening in the moment.

The Buddha gave an example of just how attentive we should be. He told of a person who was ordered to walk through a crowd with a water jug full to the brim balanced on his head. Behind him walked a soldier with a sword. If a single drop was spilt the soldier would cut off his head! So you can be sure that the person with the jug walked very attentively. That is the quality of attention required in meditation.

Yet, it has to be a *relaxed* awareness. If there is too much force or strain the least jostling will cause the water to spill. The person with the jug has to be loose and rhythmic, flowing with the changing scene, yet staying attentive in each moment.

This is the kind of care we should take in practising awareness, being relaxed yet alert. This kind of training helps to maintain your balance and the ability to live in harmony with others.

Maintaining your balance in meditation is a matter of harmonising three factors: *effort*, *concentration* and *awareness*. Too much effort makes the mind restless, while too much concentration narrows the awareness and restricts the attention to a single point. Effort and concentration are active factors, while awareness is passive. As you practise, keep in mind the characteristics of these three factors for applying them appropriately will allow you to adjust, harmonise and keep your meditation practice in balance.

Each type of meditation requires a different form of concentration. In Calm or Serenity meditation (*Samatha*) the meditator fixes on a single object, ignoring other objects to become absorbed in one object. Insight meditation (*Vipassana*) is a moment-to-moment knowing of various objects as they arise without fixing on any particular object. Actually, Insight meditation is really a matter of an *intensification* of awareness rather than concentration. So, if you wish to change the meditation mode, from Serenity to Insight, fixing on a single object has to be dropped to allow for an open moment-to-moment awareness of whatever is predominant in your experience.

As Insight meditation is the practice of awareness, it is not necessary to induce concentration as such, because sufficient concentration will naturally arise by continuously maintaining the attention. There is no problem in having too much awareness, as there is in effort and concentration. It is not something that you can overdo, rather it is more likely that

there is not enough awareness to help balance the factors of effort and concentration. So, really it's more important to put the effort in maintaining the awareness, as continuity of attention will produce calm and a sweetening of the mind which is the same benefit gained from concentration meditation.

Five ways to maintain the balance

Witnessing your own experience — Noting impartially whatever you are experiencing, while you are experiencing it, thus creating a '*witnessing*' consciousness.

Letting go — Rather than seeking gratification of wishes, impulses and desires, there has to be at least some degree of letting go to create the space to see.

The Removal of the Censor — An attitude of acceptance of all thoughts, feelings, emotions and sensations into awareness without discrimination or selection.

An Attitude of Neutrality — A neutral registering of physical and mental events without the slightest posturing or positioning towards them.

Being Receptive — Meditation is not about being aloof from the experience but being alert, sensitive and intimate with what is observed, from a place of receptivity.

Loving-kindness Meditation

Loving-kindness meditation can be brought in to support the practice of awareness to keep the mind open and sweet. It provides a good balance which compliments insight meditation. Loving-kindness was taught by the Buddha to develop selfless or altruistic love. Hatred cannot coexist with loving-kindness. It dissipates if we supplant it with thoughts based on loving-kindness.

It is a fact of life that many people are troubled by negative mind states yet do little about developing skills to deal with it. Yet even when the mind goes sour it is within most people's capacity to arouse feelings of loving-kindness to sweeten it. Loving-kindness, as a meditation practice, specifically retrains the mind to overcome all forms of negativity. It brings about positive attitudinal changes by systematically developing the quality of 'loving-acceptance'. In this way, it acts as a form of self-psychotherapy, a way of healing the troubled mind to free it from its pain and confusion.

Loving-kindness is practised as the first of a series of meditations that produce four qualities of love: Friendliness (metta), Compassion (karuna), Appreciative Joy (mudita) and Equanimity (upekkha). The quality of 'friendliness' is expressed as warmth that reaches out and embraces others. When loving-kindness matures it naturally overflows into compassion, because it empathizes with people's difficulties; one needs to be wary of its near enemy, pity, which merely mimics the quality of concern without empathy. The positive expression of empathy is an appreciation of other people's good qualities or good fortune rather than feelings of jealousy towards them, which is the enemy of appreciative joy. This series of meditations comes to maturity in the state of on-

looking equanimity. This equanimity has to be cultivated within the context of this series of meditations or else it tends to manifest as its near enemy, indifference or aloofness. It remains caring and on-looking with an equal spread of feeling and acceptance toward all people, relationships and situations without discrimination.

Systematic Loving-kindness Practice

To receive its full benefits, loving-kindness meditation needs to be developed systematically to the level of meditative absorption or one-pointedness. The aim of the practice is to develop the five absorption factors of concentration: the first two are causal factors — applied thought and sustained thought, followed by three effects — rapture, ease-of-mind and one-pointedness or unification of mind. The five absorption factors counteract the five mental hindrances or obstacles for the meditator: applied thought, by arousing energy and effort, overcomes the hindrance of sloth and torpor; sustained thought, by steadying the mind, overcomes skeptical doubt which has the characteristic of wavering; rapture, with its uplifting effervescence, prevails over feelings of ill-will; ease-of-mind, by relieving accumulated stress, counteracts restlessness or agitation of mind; while one-pointedness holds the mind's wanderings in the sense-fields to inhibit sensuality. Achieving deep concentration with this positive mind set will tend to imprint the new positive conditioning while overriding the old negative patterns. In this way, old negative habits are changed, freeing one to form new positive ways of relating.

How to do loving-kindness meditation

The practice begins with developing loving acceptance of yourself. If resistance is experienced then it indicates feelings of unworthiness are present. No matter, this means there is work to be done, and the practice itself is designed to overcome any feelings of self-doubt or negativity. Then you are ready to develop loving-kindness to others.

Four types of people are chosen to send your loving-kindness to:

A respected, beloved person — such as a spiritual teacher;

A dearly beloved — which could be a close family member or friend;

A neutral person — somebody you know but have no special feeling towards, eg. a person who serves you over a counter;

A hostile person — someone you are currently having difficulty with.

Starting with yourself, then moving systematically from person to person in the above order will break down the barriers between the four types people and yourself. It will break down the divisions within your own mind, the source of much of the conflict we experience.

Just a word of caution, it is best to choose a member of the same sex or if you have a sexual bias to your own sex then a person of the opposite sex. This avoids the risk of arousing the near enemy of loving-kindness, lust. Try different people to

practise on as some people do not easily fit into the above categories, but do keep to the prescribed order.

Ways of arousing feelings of loving-kindness

Visualization — Bring up a mental picture. See yourself or the person the feeling is directed at smiling back at you or just being joyous.

By reflection — Reflect on the positive qualities of a person and the acts of kindness they have done. And to yourself, make an affirmation, a positive statement about yourself, using your own words.

Auditory — This is the simplest way but probably the most effective. Repeat an internalized mantra or a word or phrase such as ‘loving-kindness’.

The visualizations, reflections and the repetition of loving-kindness are devices to help you arouse a positive feeling of loving-kindness. You can use all of them or one that works best for you. When the positive feeling arises switch from the devices to the feeling, as it is the feeling that is the primary focus. Keep the mind fixed on the feeling, if it strays bring it back to the device or if the feeling weakens or is lost then return to the device, i.e. use the visualization to bring back or strengthen the feeling.

The second stage is Directional Pervasion where you systematically project the aroused feeling of loving-kindness

to all points of the compass: north, south, east and west, up and down, and all around. This directional pervasion can be enhanced by bringing to mind friends and communities in the cities, towns and countries around the world.

Non-specific Pervasion tends to spontaneously happen as the practice matures. It is not discriminating. It has no specific object and involves just naturally radiating feelings of universal love. When it arises the practice has come to maturity in that it has changed preferential love, which is an attached love, to an all-embracing, unconditional love!

Loving-kindness is a heart meditation and should not be seen as just a formal sitting practice removed from everyday life. So take your good vibes outside into the streets, at home, at work, into your relationships. Applying the practice to daily life is a matter of purposefully directing a friendly attitude and having openness toward everybody you relate to without discrimination.

May you be happy hearted!

Daily Meditation Practice

The image most often associated with meditation is that of a sitting Buddha fixed in a crossed-legged posture. While such a representation is undoubtedly inspirational and aesthetically pleasing, it unfortunately suggests to the uninitiated that meditation is a static, 'statue-like' pursuit practised only in meditation halls.

If meditation is to have any relevance to everyday life it has to be done at home. This does not just mean your residence but wherever your attention happens to reside. To meditate at home requires a 'hands-on', dynamic approach that is not restricted to any particular time, place or posture. It should be integrated into the ordinary activities of life and become the basis for a meditative lifestyle in the home and everyday life.

Yet it has to be acknowledged that integrating meditation into daily life is not easy. Therefore you need to purposefully set yourself up to do it; good intention is not enough. There has to be commitment. So consider your priorities: what is more important, hours sitting in front of the TV screen or half an hour or so of sitting meditation? The regular daily home sit is the anchor for the practice. Even if it is only used as a form of mental hygiene, as in 'unstressing', daily practice will greatly contribute towards harmonizing your family and work relationships.

It is important to maintain the daily meditation sits at home as a way of sustaining and stabilizing your practice. With a busy life it is easy to convince yourself that you really haven't the time to maintain regular sitting or when you are feeling tired that you should just drop it. Naturally, when you get stressed or overtired there is resistance to facing the stress by meditating. But it is usually only an initial resistance you have to face before you go through it. Also, do not evaluate your practice, thinking if the meditation isn't of sufficiently good quality you are wasting your time. It is all grist for the mill, you must persist as it is vital to maintain the habit of practice to get the long term benefits.

It is worth quoting from His Holiness, the Dalai Lama for the more compassionate aspect of the practice.

‘I myself feel and also tell other Buddhists that the question of Nirvana will come later. There is not much hurry. But if in day-to-day life you lead a good life, honestly with love, with compassion, with less selfishness then automatically it will lead to Nirvana. Opposite to this, if we talk about Nirvana, talk about philosophy but do not much bother about day-to-day practice, then you may reach a strange Nirvana but will not reach the correct Nirvana because your daily practice is nothing. We must implement the teaching in daily life.’

There is a saying that the beginning and the end of a journey are essentially the same. This is especially true of meditation. For there is nowhere you need to go to discover your true nature other than where you can be now, meditating at your home-base.

This Moment!

We can be grateful to the Buddha for these teachings, but it is by actually implementing the teaching by eating the admired fruit, that you receive the benefits. While it is not easy, yet it is not complicated and there is nothing much else you need to know in order to put into practise the basic instructions you have just read. Start now by paying attention to what is happening in your body and mind at this moment! Delaying in the hope of finding better instructions or expecting ideal conditions to somehow manifest before you can practise is just prolonging the ordeal. The work is in the present, so the blessing is of the present.

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About the teacher...

Ven. Pannyavaro is an Australian Buddhist monk who has devoted his life to the meditational aspects of the Buddha's teachings. During his monastic training, he practised under several meditation masters including Ven. Sayadaw U Janaka of Chanmyay Meditation Centre, Burma, who is the foremost disciple of the renowned Burmese meditation master, the late Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw.

Ven. Pannyavaro helped in the building of a number of the very early Buddhist communities and centres in Australia. He received full ordination at Wat Borvornivet, under the Sangha Raja of Thailand, Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara. During more than 25 years of training, he has studied and practised meditation in all of the major Theravada Buddhist countries, including long periods of intensive practice of Satipatthana-Vipassana meditation at the Mahasi Sayadaw Centres in Burma.

Now, as a qualified meditation teacher, who naturally empathises with the concerns and needs of Western meditators, he combines his long training and life experience to bring together a practical, in-depth approach to the teaching of Vipassana meditation.

Venerable Pannyavaro, founded BuddhaNet, a computer information network, in 1993. He first used computers for simple desktop publishing, and with the gift of a modem discovered the on-line community and BuddhaNet came into being. BuddhaNet was the first Buddhist BBS (bulletin board system) which later evolved into Australia's first Buddhist website. This electronic Buddhist Information Network on the Internet's World Wide Web is now one of the largest and most popular Buddhist website in the world with over 50, 000 strikes per day.

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