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"Culadasa has given us a clear, detailed, contemporary map of meditation, beautifully attuned to our household lives. Through his mastery of both the science and art of conscious living, Culadasa imparts the practices and confidence we need to walk the path of liberation through all the stages to Awakening. I love his friendly, encouraging teaching!"

—Trudy Goodman, PhD, guiding teacher at InsightLA

"In a time where meditation and its twin sister, mindfulness, have become the fads *du jour*, Culadasa gives us the real deal in this encyclopedic handbook. If you're serious about meditation, *The Mind Illuminated* should be on your bookshelf."

—Lama Marut, author of *A Spiritual Renegade's Guide to the Good Life* and *Be Nobody*

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"*The Mind Illuminated* is an extraordinary accomplishment. Culadasa has distilled his many years of meditative practice and teaching, his deep background in Theravada and Vajrayana traditions, and his extensive knowledge of cognitive science and neuroscience to provide a unique and highly practical guidebook to meditation practice. The granular detail that Culadasa provides regarding various experiences along the path and his practically grounded advice for dealing with obstacles and developing specific skills are unique in the published literature on meditation. Regardless of the particular tradition in which one practices, or the amount of one's practice experience, there is a cornucopia of wisdom and detailed guidance here that merits careful study and practice. This is a true jewel of a book that belongs on the desk or night table of every meditation practitioner."

—Sensei Al Genkai Kaszniak, PhD, guiding teacher at Upaya Zen Sangha of Tucson;
Emeritus Professor of Psychology, University of Arizona

The

MIND ILLUMINATED

A Complete Meditation Guide Integrating Buddhist Wisdom and Brain Science for Greater Mindfulness

Culadasa (John Yates, PhD)

and **Matthew Immergut, PhD,**

with **Jeremy Graves**

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Foreword

SO HOW does a neuroscientist end up as a meditation master? The two disciplines are different, to be sure. My training in brain science deals with neurons and synapses, while my study of meditation is concerned with matters of attention, introspective awareness, and investigating the nature of subjective experience. But in many ways, I've found that the two modes of understanding the world are more complementary than one might think, and they've given me a unique insight into how mindfulness actually changes the brain and our perceptions of the world around us.

I've always been a seeker. For as long as I can remember, I've been fascinated by both the mind and the physical sciences. I always felt there must be a way to make sense of and unify our understanding of the world. What I sought, and what eventually crystalized into a lifelong passion, was nothing less than a search for ultimate Truth. Little did I know what a long and convoluted (but ultimately rewarding) journey I would take to find it.

I spent my teen years reading philosophy and psychology—Kant, Husserl, James, and Jung in particular. Despite the many insights they offered, it was disappointing to discover how little we knew about the mind, especially as compared to the precision and rapidly increasing depth of our knowledge of the physical world.

So I then turned to religion—Christianity, specifically—in the hope of finding answers. Inspired by the writings of John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, I thought this might offer a path to my goal. After about three years of dedicated study and practice, I became a seminarian and was soon immersed in Church history, philosophy, theology, and interpretive doctrines. But after another year and a half, I left, disillusioned at how unrepresentative the great mystics were of

the modern church. Another dead end. However, I was not deterred in my search for Truth.

Since this happened during the mid-sixties, I followed in the footsteps of a whole generation of seekers and turned to mind-altering chemicals and plant medicines for further exploration. Through my experiences with these, I gained for the first time some sense of what the early Christian mystics had spoken about. The search for Truth seemed almost within my grasp. However, entheogens, as they are sometimes called, have their limitations. Mostly I realized just how fluid our perceptions are and how much they depend upon neurochemical events in the brain—much more than on the data provided via our sense organs.

Shortly after realizing this, I was introduced to Eastern religions with their promise of exactly the kind of Truth I sought. Unfortunately, I couldn't afford to go to Asia like Ram Dass and others who had also discovered both the virtues and limitations of mind-altering substances. But then the Beatles introduced Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Transcendental Meditation to the West. This marked the true beginning of my meditation career.

Not all of my exploration had been in the spiritual world. I've always had an interest in the so-called "hard sciences" (first sparked by my father, who was himself a research scientist with interests in everything from geology to astrophysics). By this time I was a graduate student in physiology—the study of the mechanisms of the human body—and the idea of exploring the mind introspectively while at the same time studying its relationship to the brain was fascinating. These parallel explorations were to become my life's work. I spent two years practicing Transcendental Meditation, during which time I also completed my master's degree and began working on my PhD.

When I discovered Buddhist meditation, the many pieces of my life so far began to fall perfectly into place. I'd come into possession of a sitar in need of repair, and I wanted to learn to play it. By chance I met someone who could help me do both, and who had also spent several years studying Buddhism and meditating in Burma and Thailand. He was to become my first real spiritual teacher. Upasaka Kema Ananda had returned from Southeast Asia to teach others what he had learned, and had created a small residential community of students.

A very clear pattern has emerged from our scientific explorations of the brain: Over and over again, we find there are neural correlates for mental activities. Although some will resist this statement, I believe we will eventually find that all mental phenomena, without exception, have their neural correlates. This has led many scientists to become staunch materialists, insisting that the mind is merely what matter does when organized to an appropriate degree of complexity. I am not one of them.

Historically, the prevailing view in cultures throughout the world has been dualism, the idea that matter is one thing and the mind another. However, close examination renders this view untenable. As a result, two reductionist interpretations have always existed side by side with the dualistic view, each eliminating one side or the other of this dualism. Materialistic reductionism asserts there is only matter, and the mind is at best an emergent property of highly organized matter. And modern neuroscience is believed by many to support this view.

On the other hand, meditation and other spiritual practices often make it clear that our subjectively experienced reality is mind-created—exactly the realization I had in my teens, although I arrived at it from a different route. This realization often draws people to some form of idealism, the other reductionist interpretation, which asserts there is only mind, and that matter is an illusion, a mere projection of the mind to account for experience. For them, science is irrelevant to any search for ultimate Truth. Obviously, I'm not one of those, either.

I am a non-dualist. Primarily as a result of meditation experiences, but supported by rational analysis as well, I hold strongly to this fourth alternative view. There is only *one* kind of "stuff," and *both* mind and matter are mere appearances. When looked at from the outside, this "stuff" appears as matter, and as such has been the object of scientific investigation. But when examined from the inside, this exact same "stuff" appears as mind. Non-duality, as realized through direct experience in meditation, completely resolves this dilemma. Both the implications and explanatory power of non-dualism are vast, and would require at least another book to even scratch the surface. But thus, I say that I have spent my life investigating the mind from the outside through neuroscience, and the brain from the inside through meditation.

The core of my career as a dedicated lay practitioner has been a combination of daily study, practice, and numerous meditation retreats. This has been interspersed with several marriages, children, career moves, and all the ordinary distractions of a layman's life. The latter were as helpful as much as they were distractions, giving me plenty of opportunity to apply what I had learned by working through my own conditioning under challenging circumstances.

I am especially blessed to have been present for this great intersection of the various Buddhist practice traditions, once so isolated from each other, as they have come together in the great melting pot of a developing global culture. I am equally blessed to have witnessed the tremendous advances in technology and research that are revealing the nature of physical reality, which includes unlocking the mysteries of the human brain. In particular, I feel deep appreciation and gratitude for the opportunity to bear witness to and participate in a process in which the cumulative wisdom of these Buddhist traditions rubs shoulders with Western scientific inquiry. This has all been part of my own personal journey, from despair to joy and from ignorance to wisdom, for which I am incredibly grateful. This book is my offering to all Truth seekers everywhere who are on their own special journeys.

Introduction

MY PURPOSE in writing this book was to create a detailed and comprehensive meditation manual that is easy to use. Much has been written about the many benefits of meditation and its contributions to emotional, psychological, and social well-being. But there is surprisingly little information available on how the mind works and how to train it. This is an attempt to fill that conspicuous need.

This book is appropriate for anyone with a strong interest in meditation, from a complete beginner to someone who has practiced for decades. It will be particularly useful for those who already have a practice and feel ready to go further on the contemplative path. It's also for people who are dissatisfied with their progress despite years of meditation. This includes practitioners who feel they've actually benefited from meditation, but who have started to believe the more profound states of consciousness meditation offers are beyond their reach. Rest assured, the full rewards of meditation are closer than you think.

By necessity, the material I cover is often quite detailed and nuanced. Yet, it is my sincere belief that anyone with motivation can succeed. And it doesn't have to take a long time. The whole training process is divided into ten distinct, easy-to-identify Stages, with thorough explanations and instructions presented along the way—from your first steps on the contemplative path, all the way to being an adept practitioner at the threshold of ***Awakening***.[1]

MEDITATION: THE SCIENCE AND ART OF LIVING

Meditation is a science, the systematic process of training the mind. It is the *science* of meditation that allows people from all walks of life to experience the same amazing benefits. A regular sitting practice has been shown to enhance concentration, lower blood pressure, and

improve sleep. It is used to treat chronic pain, post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive disorders. Meditators develop valuable insights into their personality, behaviors, and relationships, making it easier to recognize and change past conditioning and counterproductive views that make life difficult. They have a greater awareness and sensitivity to others, which is enormously helpful at work and in personal relationships. The calming and relaxing effects of meditation also translate into increased emotional stability when confronting the inevitable stresses of life. Yet, *these are only incidental benefits.*

Fully developed meditation skills also give rise to unique and wonderful mental states characterized by physical comfort and pleasure, joy and happiness, deep satisfaction, and profound inner peace—states that can open the mind to an intuitive appreciation of our interconnectedness and dispel the illusion of separateness created by our egos. Furthermore, these fruits of meditation can be enjoyed all day long, for many days at a time, and we can renew them whenever we like just by sitting down and practicing. I will describe these mental states in detail, and the systematic training presented here will lead to them with unfailing certainty. But even so, *these peak experiences aren't the ultimate benefit of meditation.* While bliss, joy, tranquility, and equanimity are delightful, they are also transitory and easily disrupted by sickness, aging, and difficult life circumstances. They also offer no protection from the corrupting influences of lust, greed, and aversion, nor their consequences. Therefore, these states are not an end in themselves, but only a means to a higher goal.

That higher goal is *Awakening.* Other commonly used terms include *Enlightenment*, *Liberation*, or *Self-Realization*. Each of these refers to a complete and lasting freedom from suffering, unaffected by aging, disease, or circumstance. True happiness, the bliss of perfect contentment, follows upon liberation from suffering. Awakening isn't some transient experience of unity and temporary dissolution of ego. It's the attainment of genuine wisdom; an enlightened understanding that comes from a profound realization and awakening to ultimate truth. This is a *cognitive event* that dispels ignorance through direct experience. Direct knowledge of the true nature of reality and the permanent liberation from suffering describes the only genuinely

satisfactory goal of the spiritual path. A mind with this type of Insight experiences life, and death, as a great adventure, with the clear purpose of manifesting love and compassion toward all beings.

While this book is a kind of technical manual, it's also an artist's handbook. Meditation is the *art* of fully conscious living. What we make of our life—the sum total of thoughts, emotions, words, and actions that fill the brief interval between birth and death—is our one great creative masterpiece. The beauty and significance of a life well lived consists not in the works we leave behind, or in what history has to say about us. It comes from the quality of conscious experience that infuses our every waking moment, and from the impact we have on others.

"Know thyself" is the advice of sages. To live life consciously and creatively as a work of art, we need to understand the raw material we have to work with. This is nothing other than the continuously unfolding stream of conscious experience that is our life. Whether we're awake or dreaming, this stream consists of sensations, thoughts, emotions, and the choices we make in response to them. That *is* our personal reality. The art and science of meditation helps us live a more fulfilling life, because it gives us the tools we need to examine and work with our conscious experience.

In other words, for your personal reality to be created purposefully, rather than haphazardly, you must understand your mind. But the kind of understanding required isn't just intellectual, which is ineffective by itself. Like a naturalist studying an organism in its habitat, we need to develop an intuitive understanding of our mind. This only comes from direct observation and experience. For life to become a consciously created work of art and beauty, we must first realize our innate capacity to become a more fully conscious being. Then, through appropriately directed conscious activity, we can develop an intuitive understanding of the true nature of reality. It's only through this kind of Insight that you can accomplish the highest purpose of meditative practice: Awakening. This should be the goal of your practice.

When life is lived in a fully conscious way, with wisdom, we can eventually overcome all harmful emotions and behavior. We won't experience greed, even in the face of lack. Nor will we have ill will, even when confronted by aggression and hostility. When our speech and action comes from a place of wisdom and compassion, they will always produce better results than when driven by greed and anger.

comes directly from traditional teachings, Asanga in particular, the meditation instructions that flesh it out do not.

Also, this book is a fusion of teachings from different Buddhist traditions. While it is entirely consistent with all of them, it does not reflect any one tradition in particular. I believe this is one of its great advantages. It brings together the Indo-Tibetan Mahayana and traditional Theravada meditation teachings, and shows how each fills in the gaps of the other. The techniques presented here apply to every kind of meditation practice.

Keep in mind that all these source teachings were intended for monastics living in supportive communities of meditators. There wasn't much need to provide basic instructions and practical details, or to give examples. This isn't the case for modern lay practitioners. Most are practicing with little guidance, and often on their own. Therefore, while closely following these original teachings, I provide much more detail and give examples. I have also added an extra Stage, "Establishing a Practice," to Asanga's nine stages to help people with jobs, families, and other responsibilities navigate the challenge of finding the time for meditation in their busy lives.[5] These and other differences in this book reflect the differences between practicing as a householder and as a monastic. To help you progress as a householder, I offer you a clear map of the process that describes the whole journey, step by step: what needs to be accomplished at each Stage and how to do it, what things are better left until a later Stage, and what pitfalls should be avoided. Otherwise, the contemplative path can seem like traveling from New York to L.A. with directions like "turn right" or "turn left," but without a road map, or a description of the terrain. Some people might make it eventually, but the majority would get lost. However, an accurate map will let you know where you're at, and where you need to head next. It will also make the whole journey much quicker, easier, and more enjoyable.

A book like this inevitably requires its own technical vocabulary. Some of these terms are influenced by Western psychology and cognitive sciences, and a few come from the ancient languages of India: Pali and Sanskrit.[6] Many others are familiar words you're quite used to hearing, such as attention and awareness, but I will use them in a very specific way. Taking a little extra time to learn the meaning of these terms will be immensely helpful. It gives us a precise language to

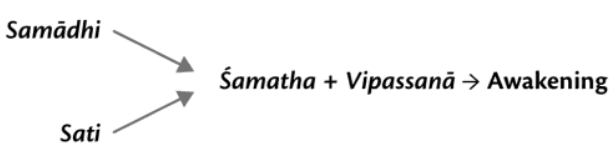
describe the practice and understand subtle experiences and states of mind. I define these key terms as simply and clearly as possible, boldfacing and italicizing them each time they appear in a new context. You can find them all defined in the glossary at the back of the book.

PUTTING THIS PRACTICE INTO CONTEXT

The meditation landscape in the West is a vibrant but confusing place. Tibetan practices emphasize elaborate visualizations or sophisticated analytical meditations, whereas Zen strips meditation down to the bare bones, giving you minimal instructions like, "Just sit." Some Theravada teachers emphasize rigorously cultivating mindfulness to the exclusion of stable, focused attention, while others insist that intense concentration leading to deep ***meditative absorption***[7] is best. Rather than argue for any specific technique, this book will help you make sense of all these different approaches without having to reject any of them. But to do this, I first need to clarify an important set of terms commonly found in meditation literature, showing how they relate to each other and to the goal of ***Awakening***.[8] These terms are: ***śamatha***[9] (tranquility or calm abiding), *vipassanā*[10] (***Insight***), *samādhi* (concentration or ***stable attention***), and *sati* (***mindfulness***).

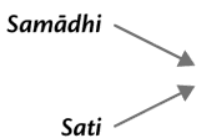
Awakening from our habitual way of perceiving things requires a profound shift in our intuitive understanding of the nature of reality. Awakening is a cognitive event, the *culminating Insight* in a series of very special Insights called *vipassanā*. This climax of the progress of Insight *only* occurs when the mind is in a unique mental state called *śamatha*.[11] *Śamatha* and *vipassanā* are both generated using stable attention (*samādhi*) and mindfulness (*sati*). Although it's possible to cultivate either *śamatha* or *vipassanā* independently of one another, *both* are necessary for Awakening.[12]

***Śamatha, Vipassanā,* and Awakening**



Śamatha has five characteristics: *effortlessly* stable attention (*samādhi*),[13] *powerful* mindfulness (*sati*), joy, tranquility, and equanimity.[14] The complete state of *śamatha* results from working with stable attention and mindfulness until joy emerges. Joy then gradually matures into tranquility, and equanimity arises out of that tranquility. A mind in *śamatha* is the ideal instrument for achieving Insight.[15]

Samādhi and _Sati_ Lead to _Śamatha_



***Śamatha* (Effortless attention & Mindfulness + Joy + Tranquility + Equanimity)**

Vipassanā refers specifically to Insight into the true nature of reality *that radically transforms our understanding of ourselves and our relationship to the world*. However, meditation also produces many other very useful "mundane insights," such as a better understanding of our own personality, social interactions, human behavior in general, and how the everyday world works. It can give us flashes of creative brilliance or intellectual epiphanies that solve problems or help us make new discoveries. These useful insights are not *vipassanā*, however, because they neither transform us personally, nor our understanding of reality, in any profound way. The Insights called *vipassanā* are not intellectual. Rather, they are experientially based, deeply intuitive realizations that transcend, and ultimately shatter, our commonly held beliefs and understandings. The five most important of these are Insights into impermanence, emptiness, the nature of suffering, the causal interdependence of all phenomena, and the illusion of the separate self (i.e., "no-Self").[16]

You can experience the first four of these Insights using stable attention (*samādhi*)[17] and mindfulness (*sati*)[18] to investigate phenomena (*dhamma vicaya*)[19] with persistence and energy (*viriya*).[20] The fifth, Insight into no-Self, is the culminating Insight that actually produces Awakening, because only by overcoming our false, self-centered worldview can we realize our true nature. But this

crucial Insight requires, in addition to the first four Insights, that the mind also be in a state of *śamatha*, filled with deep tranquility and equanimity.[21]

For both *śamatha* and *vipassanā,* you need stable attention (*samādhi*) and mindfulness (*sati*).[22] Unfortunately, many meditation traditions split *samādhi* and *sati*, linking concentration practice exclusively to *śamatha*, and mindfulness practice exclusively to *vipassanā*.[23] This creates all sorts of problems and misunderstandings, such as emphasizing mindfulness at the expense of stable attention, or vice versa. Stable, hyper-focused attention without mindfulness leads only to a state of blissful dullness: a complete dead end.[24] But, just as stable attention without mindfulness is a dead end, the opposite is also true. You simply cannot develop mindfulness without stable attention. Until you have at least a moderate degree of stability, "mindfulness practice" will consist mostly of ***mind-wandering***, physical discomfort, drowsiness, and frustration. Like two wings of a bird, both stable attention and mindfulness are needed, and when they are cultivated together, the destination of this flight is *śamatha* and *vipassanā*.[25]

Also, brief episodes of *śamatha* can occur long before you become an adept practitioner. Insight can happen at any time as well. This means a temporary convergence of *śamatha* and *vipassanā* is possible, and can lead to Awakening *at any Stage*. In this sense, Awakening is somewhat unpredictable, almost like an accident. Although the possibility of Awakening exists at any time, the probability increases steadily as you progress through the Stages. Therefore, *Awakening is an accident, but continued practice will make you accident-prone.* You're training your mind throughout the Ten Stages, cultivating all the qualities of *śamatha*. As you progress, the mind inevitably becomes more and more fertile for the seeds of Insight to ripen and blossom into Awakening.

The Ten Stages provide a systematic process for developing stable attention and mindfulness together, in balance, with *śamatha* and *vipassanā* as outcomes. The most accurate and useful description of this method is "*Śamatha-Vipassanā* meditation," or "the practice of Tranquility and Insight." Again, the practice offered in this book doesn't have to be a replacement for other techniques, but instead can complement any other type of meditation you already do. You can use the Ten

Stages approach in combination with, or as a precursor to, any of the many Mahayana or Theravada practices.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Here's a brief summary of the book's structure so you have an idea where you're headed. It begins with an overview of all Ten Stages and the Four Milestone Achievements that mark your progress through the Stages. Detailed chapters on each Stage follow, with a series of Interludes that come between the Stages.

The First Interlude lays the groundwork for the practice. You'll be introduced to the model of Conscious Experience, and learn about working with attention and peripheral awareness. The Second Interlude introduces you to the major hindrances and problems you will face in your practice. The Third Interlude builds on ideas you've learned so far to explain how mindfulness works. The Fourth and Fifth Interludes introduce new, more in-depth models of mind: the Moments of Consciousness model and the Mind-System model. The Sixth Interlude lays the foundation for Stages Seven through Ten. The Seventh Interlude provides further refinements to the models of mind you've learned so far to help you fully understand subtle and profound meditative states.

This book can be used in several ways. You can read it from front to back as you would any other book, or you can use it more as a reference guide, picking which chapters to read based on the current state of your practice. Many will find the Interludes of great help, but those less technically inclined may prefer to no more than skim the later Interludes, just to give their practice some context. If you ever find yourself feeling adrift, uncertain about where the path is headed, the chapter to reread is, "An Overview of the Ten Stages." Finally, you can consult as needed a series of useful stand-alone appendices and a glossary at the end of the book. Beginners are particularly encouraged to read the appendix on walking meditation and to incorporate walking immediately into their daily practice. The other appendices cover analytical meditations, loving-kindness practice, meditative absorptions (the ***jhānas***), and a review practice to help you bring your daily life in line with your meditation practice.

An Overview of the Ten Stages

THE ENTIRE process of training the mind unfolds through Ten Stages. Each Stage has its own distinct characteristics, challenges to overcome, and specific techniques for working through those challenges. The Stages mark gradual improvements in your abilities. As you make progress, there will also be Four Milestone Achievements that divide the Ten Stages into four distinct parts. These are especially significant transition points in your practice where mastery of certain skills takes your meditation to a whole new level.

The Stages and Milestones form a broad map to help you figure out where you are and how best to continue.

The Stages and Milestones, considered together, form a broad map to help you figure out where you are and how best to continue. Yet, because each person is unique, the route your spiritual journey takes will always be at least slightly different from that of somebody else. For this reason, we will also talk about how the process unfolds, how fast or slow you may experience progress, and what kind of attitude to have. The point isn't to force your experience to match something you have read. Instead, use this book as a guide for working with and understanding your own experiences—no matter what forms they take.

Revisit this chapter from time to time so that you keep the big picture fresh in your mind.

This chapter outlines the general arc of the practice, and the rest of the chapters provide the details. It will be helpful to revisit this chapter from time to time to keep the big picture fresh in your mind. The more clearly you understand the Stages, and why they happen in the order that they do, the quicker and more enjoyably you will walk the path toward happiness and freedom.

HOW THE PROCESS UNFOLDS

Each of the Ten Stages on the path to becoming an adept meditator is defined in terms of certain skills that you have to master. Only when you have mastered the skills of a particular Stage will you be able to

master the next Stage. This is because your abilities as a meditator gradually build on each other. Just as you have to learn to walk before you can run, you must move through the Stages in order, without skipping any of them. To make progress, you should correctly determine your current Stage, work diligently with the techniques you're given, and move on only when you have achieved mastery. Mastery of one Stage is a requirement for the mastery of the next, and none can be skipped. Taking "shortcuts" just creates problems and ultimately prolongs the process—so they're not really shortcuts. Diligence is all you need to make the fastest progress possible.

Taking shortcuts just creates problems and ultimately prolongs the process—so they're not really shortcuts.

However, even though the Stages are presented as a linear path of progress, the practice doesn't actually unfold in such a straightforward manner. For example, a beginning meditator will be working on Stages One and Two at the same time. As your practice progresses, you will frequently find yourself navigating several Stages at the same time, moving back and forth between them over weeks, days, or even during a single session. This is perfectly normal. You can also expect to have times when you seem to have jumped to a more advanced Stage, as well as days when you seem to have gone backward. In every case, the important thing is to practice according to whatever is happening in your meditation *in the present*. Don't get ahead of what is actually happening. On the other hand, once you have overcome the obstacles for a given Stage *even temporarily*, then you can work with the obstacles for the next Stage.

You will also notice that many of the techniques are similar in several different Stages. A meditator at Stage Three, for instance, uses similar techniques as a meditator at Stage Four. The same is true for Stages Five and Six. However, the goals for each Stage are always different.

The secret to progress is working with the specific obstacles and goals appropriate to your current skill level. It's like learning to skate: you have to learn the basics before you can start doing triple-axels. The earlier Stages take longer to master. However, because the Stages build on one another, the methods overlap, and the skills you develop in one Stage are used in the next, you start making faster and faster progress. Advancing from Stage Three to Four might take a long time, but progressing from Four to Five usually happens more quickly, and so on.

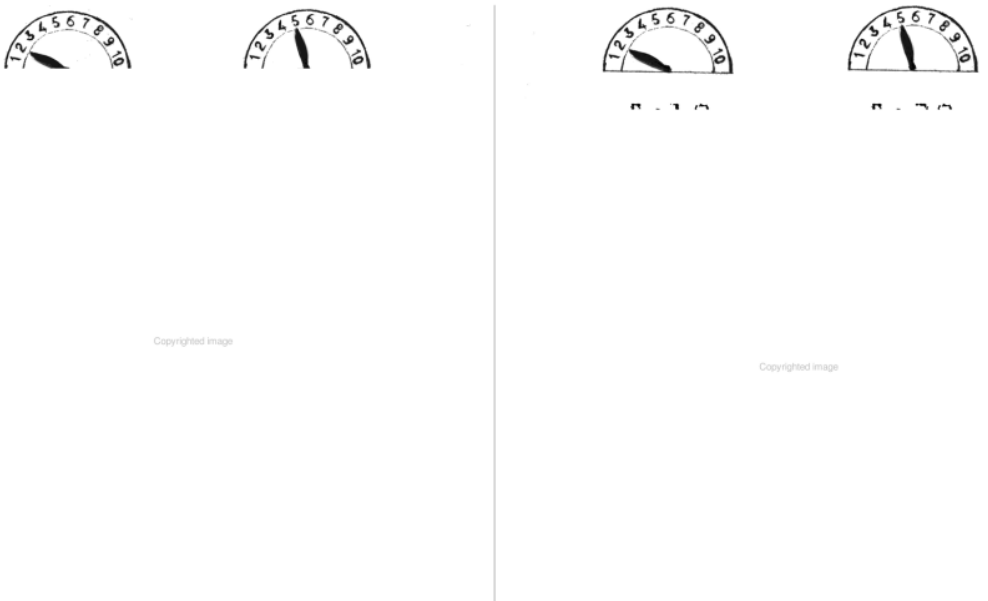


Figure 1. Progression through the stages is not linear: Expect to be moving between stages over several sits or even during a single sit.

It's common to have occasional or even frequent meditation experiences that correspond to more advanced Stages. Even a beginning meditator at Stage Two may have experiences that resemble those of advanced Stages. When this happens, you might overestimate your abilities and try to replicate that experience instead of working to master the skills for your current Stage. Such experiences have no real significance in terms of your progress, although they do show you what is possible. Use them as inspiration, while continuing to work toward mastering your current Stage. Isolated meditation experiences can happen at any time, but if they can't be repeated, consistently and intentionally, they are of little value. Once your practice matures, you will have the knowledge and skills to consistently create these kinds of experiences.

THE RATE OF PROGRESS THROUGH THE TEN STAGES

Some books give the impression that it takes many, many years or even decades to become an adept meditator. This simply isn't true!

For householders who practice properly, it's possible to master the Ten Stages within a few months or years.[1] What you need is a regular daily sitting practice of one to two hours per day in combination with some of the supplemental practices described in the appendices. Meditation retreats are quite helpful, but ones lasting months or years are certainly not necessary. Diligent daily meditation, combined with occasional longer periods of practice, will be enough for success.

That said, there are several factors that determine how fast we make progress. Some of them we can influence, others we can't. To start with, different people have different natural abilities for working with attention and awareness. Some lifestyles and career paths are more conducive to developing these skills. Also, some people are better able to discipline themselves to practice regularly and diligently. Regardless of your natural abilities, you absolutely must master Stage One, "Establishing a Practice," to make progress.

Life factors and stressful events can also affect the process. Losing your job, the death of a spouse, or a health problem can set even an advanced meditator back to the earliest Stages. In fact, almost anything that happens outside of meditation can *potentially* have this effect. This just serves as another reminder that meditative accomplishments, like everything else, depend on certain conditions, and can therefore be influenced by worldly events.

Another factor that affects your progress is the problem of compartmentalization. We have a common tendency to separate meditation practice from the rest of our life. If the skills and insights we learn on the cushion don't infuse our daily life, progress will be quite slow. It's like filling a leaky bucket. This may be one reason why some people consider long retreats the only way to make real progress. Retreats are certainly wonderful and can help bring your practice to a whole new level. Yet, we can only experience the full benefits if the wisdom we acquire permeates every facet of our life, and that takes work. Otherwise, long retreats are like filling an even bigger leaky bucket.

The most important factor for improving quickly is a clear understanding of each Stage. That means recognizing the mental faculties you need to cultivate, as well as the correct methods to overcome specific obstacles. It also means not getting ahead of yourself. Be systematic and practice at the appropriate level. Just as a scalpel is more effective

for surgery than a large knife, skillful means and positive reinforcement are much better for pacifying the mind than blind, stubborn persistence. Finesse and patience pay off.

THE TEN STAGES OF MEDITATIVE TRAINING

Here, I briefly describe each Stage's distinct characteristics, goals, challenges, and the techniques for achieving those goals and working through those challenges. Four particularly significant achievements divide the Ten Stages into four distinct parts: One through Three are the Stages of a novice; Four through Six are the Stages of a skilled meditator; Seven is a transition Stage; and Eight through Ten are the Stages of an adept. (See Table 1.) It is helpful to think of each Stage in terms of the Milestone that lies ahead. You will also notice a number of bold and italicized key terms. Don't worry if you don't know what the terms mean or can't remember everything being presented here. All of it is explained in greater detail in later chapters and the glossary.

Figure 2. If the skills and insights you learn on the cushion don't infuse your daily life, progress will be quite slow. It's like filling a leaky bucket.

Goals: Overcome forgetting and falling asleep.

Obstacles: Distractions, forgetting, mind-wandering, and sleepiness.

Skills: Use the techniques of ***following the breath*** and ***connecting*** to extend the periods of uninterrupted attention, and become familiar with how forgetting happens. Cultivate introspective awareness through the practices of ***labeling*** and ***checking in***. These techniques allow you to catch distractions *before* they lead to forgetting.

Mastery: Rarely forgetting the breath or falling asleep.

MILESTONE ONE: CONTINUOUS ATTENTION TO THE MEDITATION OBJECT

The first Milestone is continuous attention to the meditation object, which you achieve at the end of Stage Three. Before this, you're a beginner—a person who meditates, rather than a skilled meditator. When you reach this Milestone, you're no longer a novice, prone to forgetting, mind-wandering, or dozing off. By mastering Stages One through Three, you have acquired the basic, first-level skills on the way to ***stable attention***. You can now do something that no ordinary, untrained person can.[2] You will build on this initial skill set[3] over the course of the next three Stages to become a truly ***skilled meditator***.

The Skilled Meditator—Stages Four through Six

STAGE FOUR: CONTINUOUS ATTENTION AND OVERCOMING GROSS DISTRACTION AND STRONG DULLNESS

You can stay focused on the breath more or less continuously, but attention still shifts rapidly back and forth between the breath and various distractions. Whenever a distraction becomes the primary focus of your attention, it pushes the meditation object into the background. This is called ***gross distraction***. But when the mind grows calm, there tends to be another problem, ***strong dullness***. To deal with both of these challenges, you develop *continuous* ***introspective awareness*** to alert you to their presence.

Goal: Overcome gross distraction and strong dullness.

Obstacles: Distractions, pain and discomfort, intellectual insights, emotionally charged visions and memories.

Skills: Developing continuous introspective awareness allows you to make corrections before subtle distractions become gross distractions, and before subtle dullness becomes strong dullness. Learning to work with pain. Purifying the mind of past trauma and unwholesome conditioning.

Mastery: Gross distractions no longer push the breath into the background, and breath sensations don't fade or become distorted due to strong dullness.

STAGE FIVE: OVERCOMING SUBTLE DULLNESS AND INCREASING MINDFULNESS

You have overcome gross distractions and strong dullness, but there is a tendency to slip into ***stable subtle dullness***. This makes the breath sensations less vivid and causes ***peripheral awareness*** to fade. Unrecognized, subtle dullness can lead you to overestimate your abilities and move on to the next Stage prematurely, which leads to ***concentration with dullness***. You will experience only a shallow facsimile of the later Stages, and your practice will come to a dead end. To overcome subtle dullness, you must sharpen your faculties of attention and awareness.

Goal: To overcome subtle dullness and increase the power of mindfulness.

Obstacles: Subtle dullness is difficult to recognize, creates an illusion of stable attention, and is seductively pleasant.

Skills: Cultivating even stronger and more continuous introspective awareness to detect and correct for subtle dullness. Learning a new body-scanning technique to help you increase the power of your mindfulness.

Mastery: You can *sustain* or even *increase* the power of your mindfulness during each meditation session.

STAGE SIX: SUBDUING SUBTLE DISTRACTION

Attention is fairly stable but still alternates between the meditation object and ***subtle distractions*** in the background. You're now ready to bring your faculty of attention to a whole new level where subtle distractions fall away completely. You will achieve ***exclusive attention*** to the meditation object, also called ***single-pointed*** attention.

Goal: To subdue subtle distractions and develop ***metacognitive introspective awareness***.[4]

Obstacles: The tendency for attention to alternate to the continuous stream of distracting thoughts and other mental objects in peripheral awareness.

Skills: Defining your ***scope of attention*** more precisely than before, and ignoring everything outside that scope until subtle distractions fade away. Developing a much more refined and selective awareness of the mind itself, called metacognitive introspective awareness. You will also use a method called "experiencing the whole body with the breath" to further subdue potential distractions.

Mastery: Subtle distractions have almost entirely disappeared, and you have unwavering exclusive attention together with vivid mindfulness.

MILESTONE TWO: SUSTAINED EXCLUSIVE FOCUS OF ATTENTION

With mastery of Stages Four through Six, your attention no longer alternates back and forth from the breath to distractions in the background. You can focus on the meditation object to the exclusion of everything else, and your scope of attention is also stable. Dullness has completely disappeared, and mindfulness takes the form of a powerful ***metacognitive introspective awareness***. That is, you're now aware of your state of mind in every moment, even as you focus on the breath. You have accomplished the two major objectives of meditative training: stable attention and powerful mindfulness. With these abilities you're now a ***skilled meditator***, and have achieved the second Milestone.

The Transition—Stage Seven

STAGE SEVEN: EXCLUSIVE ATTENTION AND UNIFYING THE MIND

You can now investigate any object with however broad or narrow a focus you choose. But you have to stay ***vigilant*** and make a continuous ***effort*** to keep subtle distractions and subtle dullness at bay.

Goal: Effortlessly sustained exclusive attention and powerful mindfulness.

Obstacles: Distractions and dullness will return if you stop exerting effort. You must keep sustaining effort until exclusive attention and mindfulness become automatic, then effort will no longer be necessary. Boredom, restlessness, and doubt tend to arise during this time. Also, bizarre sensations and involuntary body movements can distract you from your practice. Knowing when to drop all effort is the next obstacle. But making effort has become a habit, so it's hard to stop.

Methods:[5] Practicing patiently and diligently will bring you to the threshold of effortlessness. It will get you past all the boredom and doubt, as well as the bizarre sensations and movements. Purposely relaxing your effort from time to time will let you know when effort and vigilance are no longer necessary. Then you can work on letting go of the need to be in control. Various ***Insight*** and ***jhāna*** practices add variety at this Stage.

Mastery: You can drop all effort, and the mind still maintains an unprecedented degree of stability and clarity.

MILESTONE THREE: EFFORTLESS STABILITY OF ATTENTION

The third Milestone is marked by effortlessly sustained exclusive attention together with powerful mindfulness.[6] This state is called ***mental pliancy***, and occurs because of the ***complete pacification of the discriminating mind***, meaning mental chatter and discursive analysis have stopped. Different parts of the mind are no longer so resistant or preoccupied with other things, and diverse mental processes begin to coalesce around a single purpose. This ***unification of mind*** means that, rather than struggling against itself, the mind functions more as a coherent, harmonious whole. You have completed the transition from being a skilled meditator to an ***adept meditator***.[7]

The Adept Meditator—Stages Eight through Ten

STAGE EIGHT: MENTAL PLIANCY AND PACIFYING THE SENSES

With mental pliancy, you can effortlessly sustain exclusive attention and mindfulness, but physical pain and discomfort still limit how long you can sit. The bizarre sensations and involuntary movements that began in Stage Seven not only continue, but may intensify. With continuing unification of mind and complete ***pacification of the senses***,

physical pliancy arises, and these problems disappear. Pacifying the senses doesn't imply going into some trance. It just means that the five physical senses, as well as the ***mind sense***,[8] temporarily grow quiet while you meditate.

Goal: Complete pacification of the senses and the full arising of ***meditative joy***.

Obstacles: The primary challenge is not to be distracted or distressed by the variety of extraordinary experiences during this Stage: unusual, and often unpleasant, sensations, involuntary movements, feelings of strong energy currents in the body, and intense joy. Simply let them be.

Method: Practicing effortless attention and introspective awareness will naturally lead to continued unification, pacification of the senses, and the arising of meditative joy. *Jhāna* and other Insight practices are very productive as part of this process.

Mastery: When the eyes perceive only an inner light, the ears perceive only an inner sound, the body is suffused with a sense of pleasure and comfort, and your mental state is one of intense joy. With this mental and physical pliancy, you can sit for hours without dullness, distraction, or physical discomfort.

STAGE NINE: MENTAL AND PHYSICAL PLIANCY AND CALMING THE INTENSITY OF MEDITATIVE JOY

With mental and physical pliancy comes meditative joy, a unique state of mind that brings great happiness and physical pleasure.

Goal: The maturation of meditative joy, producing tranquility and equanimity.

Obstacles: The intensity of meditative joy can perturb the mind, becoming a distraction and disrupting your practice.

Method: Becoming familiar with meditative joy through continued practice until the excitement fades, replaced by tranquility and equanimity.

Mastery: Consistently evoking mental and physical pliancy, accompanied by profound tranquility and equanimity.

STAGE ONE: Put all your effort into forming and holding a conscious intention to sit down and meditate for a set period every day, and to practice diligently for the duration of the sit. When your intentions are clear and strong, the appropriate actions naturally follow, and you'll find yourself regularly sitting down to meditate. If this doesn't happen, instead of chastising yourself and trying to force yourself to practice, work on strengthening your motivation and intentions.

STAGE TWO: Willpower can't prevent the mind from forgetting the breath. Nor can you force yourself to become aware that the mind is wandering. Instead, just hold the intention to appreciate the "aha" moment that recognizes mind-wandering, while gently but firmly redirecting attention back to the breath. Then, intend to engage with the breath as fully as possible without losing peripheral awareness. In time, the simple actions flowing from these three intentions will become mental habits. Periods of mind-wandering will become shorter, periods of attention to the breath will grow longer, and you'll have achieved your goal.

STAGE THREE: Set your intention to invoke introspective attention frequently, *before* you've forgotten the breath or fallen asleep, and make corrections as soon as you notice distractions or dullness. Also, intend to sustain peripheral awareness while engaging with the breath as fully as possible. These three intentions and the actions they produce are simply elaborations of those from Stage Two. Once they become habits, you'll rarely forget the breath.

STAGES FOUR THROUGH SIX: Set and hold the intention to be vigilant so that introspective awareness becomes continuous, and notice and immediately correct for dullness and distraction. These intentions will mature into the highly developed skills of stable attention and mindfulness. You overcome every type of dullness and distraction, achieving both exclusive, single-pointed attention and metacognitive introspective awareness.

STAGE SEVEN: Everything becomes even simpler. With the conscious intention to continuously guard against dullness and distraction, the mind becomes completely accustomed to *effortlessly* sustaining attention and mindfulness.

STAGES EIGHT THROUGH TEN: Your intention is simply to keep practicing, using skills that are now completely effortless. In Stage Eight, effortlessly sustained exclusive attention produces mental and physical pliancy, pleasure, and joy. In Stage Nine, simply abiding in the state of meditative joy causes profound tranquility and equanimity to arise. In Stage Ten, just by continuing to practice regularly, the profound joy and happiness, tranquility, and equanimity you experience in meditation persists between meditation sessions, infusing your daily life as well.

As with planting seeds, at each Stage you sow the appropriate intentions in the soil of the mind. Water these intentions with the diligence of regular practice, and protect them from the destructive pests of procrastination, doubt, desire, aversion, and agitation. These intentions

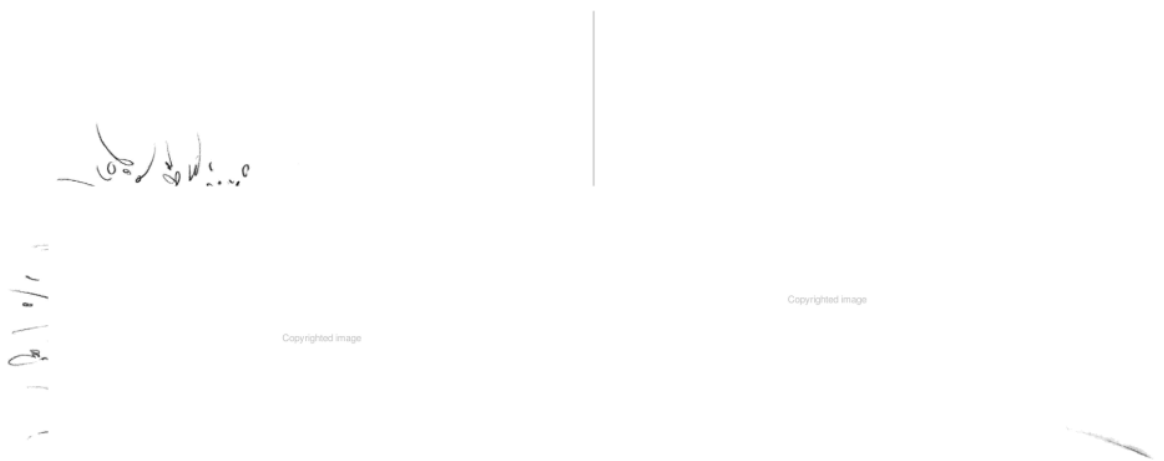


Figure 3. Getting annoyed with every instance of mind wandering is like tearing up the garden to get rid of the weeds. Attempting to force your attention to remain stable is like trying to make a sapling grow by stretching it.

will naturally flower into a specific series of mental events that mature to produce the fruits of your practice. Will a seed sprout more quickly if you keep digging it up and replanting it? No. Therefore, don't let impatience or frustration stop you from practicing, or convince you that you need to seek out a "better" or "easier" practice. Getting annoyed with every instance of mind-wandering or sleepiness is like tearing up the garden to get rid of the weeds. Attempting to force attention to remain stable is like trying to make a sapling grow taller by stretching it. Chasing after physical pliancy and meditative joy is like prying open a bud so it will blossom more quickly. Impatience and striving won't make anything grow faster. Be patient and trust in the process. Care for the mind like a skilled gardener, and everything will flower and fruit in due time.

Chasing after physical pliancy is like prying open a bud to make it blossom.

Care for the mind like a skilled gardener, and everything will flower and fruit in due time.

FIRST INTERLUDE

Conscious Experience and the Objectives of Meditation

IN THIS chapter, I introduce a basic, conceptual ***model of Conscious Experience***. You can consider this a map of the topography—the landscape of the mind, so to speak. The meditation instructions are like the roads allowing you to explore this landscape comfortably. However, remember that a map is only a representation, not the thing itself. When circumstances change—as your practice improves—you'll find yourself wanting a new map. This is why, in later chapters, I provide two additional, much more in-depth models of the mind for you to work from. Each map builds on the previous ones, and together they lead you toward the two major objectives of meditation practice: ***stable attention*** and ***mindfulness***, both of which we will look at more closely in this Interlude.

A MODEL OF CONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE

Consciousness[1] consists of whatever we're experiencing in the moment. It's a lot like vision: just as the objects in our field of vision change from one moment to the next, objects in our ***field of conscious awareness***, like sights, sounds, smells, and other external phenomena, also arise and pass away. Of course, this field isn't just limited to what we perceive with our outer senses. It also includes internal mental objects, which come in the form of transitory thoughts, feelings, and memories.

Attention and Peripheral Awareness

Conscious experience takes two different forms, ***attention*** and ***peripheral awareness***. Whenever we focus our *attention* on something, it dominates our conscious experience. At the same time, however, we can be more generally *aware* of things in the background. For example, right now your attention is focused on what you're reading. At the same time you're also aware of other sights, sounds, smells, and sensations in the periphery.

Figure 6. Attention and awareness are two different ways of knowing the world. Attention singles out some small part of the field of conscious awareness to analyze and interpret it. Peripheral awareness provides the overall context for conscious experience.

JUMP-STARTING YOUR PRACTICE

Although a full understanding of attention and awareness is essential, some of you might want to get right into the practice. So here is a quick and basic version of the meditation instructions.

1. Posture
    a. Whether you sit in a chair or on a cushion on the floor, make yourself as comfortable as possible with your back straight.
    b. Get your back, neck, and head in alignment, front-to-back and side-to-side.
    c. I recommend closed eyes to start with, but you can keep them open if you prefer.
2. Relax
    a. While maintaining a straight back, release any tension in the body.
    b. Relax your mind. Take some moments to appreciate the fact that you're gifting yourself with time away from all the usual tasks and worries of your life.
3. Intention and Breath
    a. Resolve to practice diligently for the entire meditation session no matter how it goes.
    b. Breathe through your nose as naturally as possible without trying to control your breath.
    c. Bring your attention to the sensations associated with the breath in and around your nostrils or upper lip. Another option is to center your attention on the sensations associated with breathing in the abdomen. See which of these is the easiest for you to focus on and then stick with that one, at least for the sit at hand. This is your meditation object.
    d. Allow your attention to stay centered on your meditation object while your peripheral awareness remains relaxed and open to anything that arises (e.g., sounds in the environment, physical sensations in the body, thoughts in the background).
    e. Try to keep your attention centered on the meditation object. *Inevitably*, your mind will get distracted and drift away. As soon as you recognize this has happened, take a moment to appreciate the fact that you have remembered your intention to meditate, and give your mind an imaginary "pat on the back." The tendency is to judge yourself and feel disappointed for having lost your focus, but doing so is counterproductive. Mind-wandering is natural, so it's not important that you lost your focus. Remembering and returning your focus to the meditation object is what's important. Therefore, positively reinforce such behavior by doing your best to reward the mind for remembering.
    f. Now gently re-center your attention on the meditation object.
    g. Repeat step 3 until the meditation session is over, and remember, the only bad meditation session is the one you didn't do!

THE FIRST OBJECTIVE OF MEDITATION: STABLE ATTENTION

"Concentration" as a concept is rather vague, and in danger of being misinterpreted or of having meditation students bring their own preconceived ideas to it. I prefer to use the more accurate and useful term, "stable attention." It's more descriptive of what we're actually trying to do in meditation.

Stable attention is the ability to direct and sustain the focus of attention, and control the scope of attention.

Stable attention is the ability to intentionally ***direct*** and ***sustain*** the ***focus of attention***, as well as to control the ***scope of attention***. Intentionally directing and sustaining attention simply means that we learn to choose which object we're going to attend to, and keep our attention continuously fixed on it. Controlling the scope of attention means training the mind to adjust how wide or narrow our focus is, and being more selective and intentional about what is included and excluded. Again, as an analogy, consider how vision works. To see something in all its detail, we must hold our gaze steady for as long as necessary, while focusing neither too narrowly nor too broadly.

For many, everyday life is a combination of distraction and hectic multitasking. Having focused, sustained, and selective attention is a much more peaceful and engaging way of experiencing the world. It's also the most valuable tool we have for investigating our minds and coming to understand ourselves. Let's consider in more detail how stable attention is cultivated.

Spontaneous Movements of Attention

To develop intentionally directed, stable attention, you must first have a clear understanding of its opposite, ***spontaneous movements of attention***. Attention moves spontaneously in three different ways: scanning, getting captured, and alternating.

Scanning is when our focus moves from object to object, searching the outer world or the contents of our mind for something of interest. Getting captured happens when an object, like a thought, bodily sensation, or some external stimulus, suddenly captures our attention. An ambulance siren can take our attention away from the book we're reading, or the pain of a stubbed toe can take our attention away from pleasant thoughts while we're out for a walk. You're probably familiar with this sort of spontaneous movement of attention, as it happens all the time.

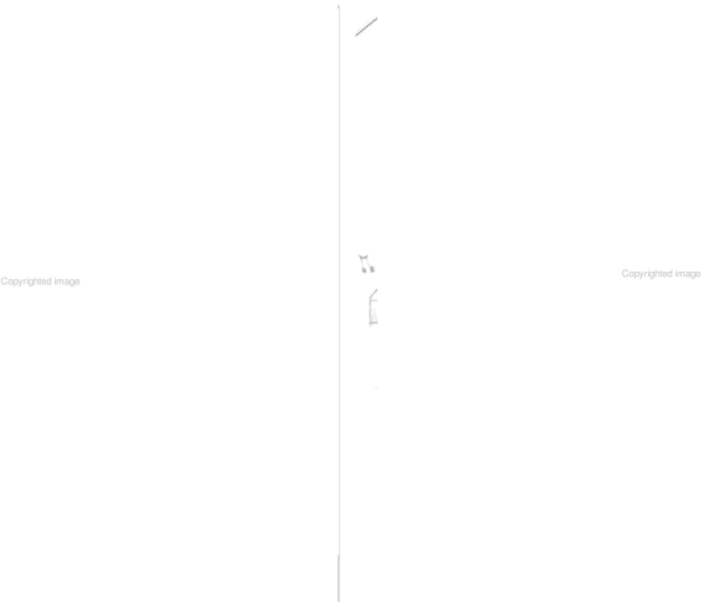


Figure 7. Attention moves spontaneously in three different ways: scanning, getting captured, and alternating. Scanning is when your focus moves from object to object, searching for something of interest. If attention doesn't find anything, it returns to its original focus. Attention gets captured when an object, like a thought, bodily sensation, or some external stimulus, suddenly catches your attention.

The third type of spontaneous movement, ***alternating attention***, is a subtler kind of scattered attention only apparent to an experienced meditator. To be clear, everyone's attention alternates, whether they meditate or not. The difference is that the non-meditator doesn't experience his or her attention as alternating. Instead, there is the illusion of paying attention to *two or more things simultaneously*. What's actually happening is that the focus of attention is moving very quickly among several different objects, but staying with each one for about the same amount of time overall. It's the kind of attention we have when multitasking. If you're doodling in class while listening to the professor, your focus is moving so swiftly that there doesn't seem to be a break in your attention to each object. Attention to both seems simultaneous. Another way we might experience alternating attention is when our attention seems to stay focused on one object while certain things stand out from peripheral awareness. For instance, you might be answering an email, but you also hear the cat meowing to be fed and feel pressure in your bladder. Attention

Figure 8. The third kind of spontaneous movement is where attention alternates between two or more things.

is still shifting rapidly among different objects, but it lingers longer on the main object, answering the email. Essentially, anything that stands out from the background of peripheral awareness does so because it is intermittently becoming an object of attention. In all these examples, we experience a continuity of attention, but attention is shifting rapidly among different objects. Unless you're purposely multitasking, alternating attention is a kind of spontaneous movement of attention. That means a certain amount of ***distraction*** is present.

During meditation, intentional movements of attention will eventually replace all three types of spontaneous movements of attention. This process unfolds gradually and systematically through the Stages. Let's look at what it means to intentionally direct and sustain attention, and how to control the scope of attention.

An expanded scope is a lot like alternating attention, in that you can include more things in attention. It, too, can be a useful tool for multitasking. Yet, when we're trying to have stable attention, a scope that keeps spontaneously expanding will let in all kinds of distractions. Attention won't really be stable until you can intentionally determine the scope of your focus and keep it steady.

This is a skill you cultivate mainly in Stage Six, after your focus of attention has become more stable. You learn to control the scope through a series of exercises where you deliberately shift between a narrow and a broad focus. In both Stages Six and Seven, you give particular emphasis to *exclusive focus* on the meditation object. By Stage Eight, you have mastered control of your scope and can broaden your focus so it includes the entire field of conscious awareness in a single, open, and expansive "non-focus." Ordinarily, having so broad a focus would just mean being dimly aware of many things at once.[10] Fortunately, we can also increase the power of consciousness, meaning everything will still be quite clear. This brings us to the second objective of meditation, mindfulness.

THE SECOND OBJECTIVE OF MEDITATION: MINDFULNESS

When the mindfulness of a samurai warrior fails, he loses his life. When we lack mindfulness in daily life, something similar happens. We become so entangled in our own thoughts and emotions that we forget the bigger picture. Our perspective narrows, and we lose our way. We do and say regretful things that cause needless suffering to ourselves and others. Mindfulness allows us to recognize our options, choose our responses wisely, and take control over the direction of our lives. It also gives us the power to change our past conditioning and become the person we want to be. Most importantly, mindfulness leads to Insight, Wisdom, and Awakening.

Mindfulness allows us to recognize options, choose responses, and take control of our lives. It gives us the power to become the person we want to be. It also leads to Insight, Wisdom, and Awakening.

But what is mindfulness? "Mindfulness" is a somewhat unfortunate translation of the Pali word *sati* because it suggests being attentive, or remembering to pay attention. This doesn't really capture the full meaning and importance of *sati*. Even without *sati*, we're *always* paying attention to *something*. But with *sati*, we pay attention to the right things, and in a more skillful way. This is because having *sati* actually

Mindfulness is the optimal interaction between attention and peripheral awareness.

means that you're more fully conscious and alert than normal. As a result, our peripheral awareness is much stronger, and our attention is used with unprecedented precision and objectivity. A more accurate but clumsy-sounding phrase would be "powerfully effective conscious awareness," or "fully conscious awareness." I use the word "mindfulness" because people are familiar with it. However, by "mindfulness," I specifically mean *the optimal interaction between attention and peripheral awareness*, which requires *increasing the overall conscious power of the mind*. Let's unpack this definition.

Normal Functions of Attention and Peripheral Awareness

To really grasp mindfulness, we first have to know what attention and peripheral awareness normally do. Each has a different function, and they provide two distinct kinds of information. But they also work together, and to respond intelligently to our environment, we need both. With this understanding, you will see how ordinary attention and awareness can become that optimal interaction we call mindfulness.

Attention has a very specific job. It picks out one object from the general field of conscious awareness, then analyzes and interprets that object. It's the faculty of attention that helps us discern between conflicting pieces of information (e.g., is that a snake in the road, or just a piece of rope?). Once an object of attention has been identified and analyzed, it can be further examined, reflected on, judged, and responded to. In order for this process to happen quickly and effectively, attention turns all of its objects into concepts or abstract ideas—unless of course the object is already a concept or idea. Generally, attention translates our raw experience of the world into terms we can more easily understand, which we then organize into a picture of reality.

Peripheral awareness, on the other hand, works very differently. Instead of singling out one object for analysis, it involves a general awareness of everything our senses take in. Peripheral awareness is only minimally conceptual. It is open and inclusive, as well as holistic. That is, it's concerned with the *relationships* of objects to each other, and to the whole. Peripheral awareness allows us to respond more effectively by giving us information about the background and context of

our experience—where we are, what's happening around us, what we're doing, and why (e.g., not mistaking the rope for a snake, since we're in Alaska, and it's winter).

Attention analyzes our experience, and peripheral awareness provides the context. *When one or the other doesn't do its job, or when there isn't enough interaction between the two, then we respond to situations less effectively. We may overreact, make poor decisions, or misinterpret what's going on.*

Attention analyzes experience, and peripheral awareness provides the context. When one or the other doesn't do its job, we misinterpret, overreact, and make poor decisions.

Any new sensation, thought, or feeling appears first in peripheral awareness.[11] It is here that the mind decides whether or not something is important enough to become an object of attention. Peripheral awareness filters out unimportant information and "captures" the objects that deserve closer scrutiny by attention. This is why specific objects can seem to pop out of peripheral awareness to become the objects of attention. Attention will also browse the objects in peripheral awareness, searching for something relevant or important, or just more entertaining, to examine. This is the "scanning" process we described earlier. But what we do with attention "trains" peripheral awareness to select certain things as well. If you're interested in birds, for example, peripheral awareness learns to keep watch for flying, feathered objects.

As attention hones in on something, peripheral awareness is alert and on the lookout for anything new or unusual. When awareness takes in something that might be of interest, it frees attention from its current object and redirects it toward the new object. Say you're engrossed in a conversation while walking when, out of the corner of your eye, you notice a shape moving toward you. Peripheral awareness alerts attention, which quickly processes the information, "We're in the bike lane and a biker is heading straight for us!" So you grab your friend and step out of the way. *Peripheral awareness helps us stay alert to our surroundings and to use attention as effectively as possible. When peripheral awareness doesn't do its job, attention moves blindly, without guidance, and can be taken off guard.*

Fortunately, not every experience needs to be analyzed. Otherwise, attention would be quite overwhelmed. Peripheral awareness takes care of many things without invoking attention, such as brushing a fly away from your face while you're eating lunch. Attention can certainly be involved with brushing the fly away, as well as with other small things, like choosing what to eat next on your plate. But there are simply too many basic

tasks that don't require attention. Using it for all of them would be impossible. There are also situations that happen too fast for attention to deal with. For instance, attention can't provide the quick, reflexive response of a mother who stops her child from running into a busy street. Because peripheral awareness doesn't process information as thoroughly as attention, it responds much more quickly.[12] *If peripheral awareness doesn't do its job, attention is too easily overwhelmed and too slow to take over these functions. As a result, we don't react to these events at all, or we react to them in a completely unconscious and automatic way—blindly, mindlessly, and with none of the benefits of conscious processing.*

Another way attention and ***awareness*** work together is by helping us see things more objectively. On its own, attention usually involves a strong concern for "self." This makes sense, considering that part of attention's job is to evaluate the importance of things in terms of our personal well-being. But it also means that objects of attention can be easily distorted by desire, fear, aversion, and other emotions. Attention not only interprets objects based on self-interest, it leads us to identify with external objects (this is "my" car), or mental states ("I am" angry, happy, etc.). Peripheral awareness is less "personal" and takes things in more objectively "as they are." External objects, feeling states, and mental activities, rather than being identified with, appear in peripheral awareness as part of a bigger picture. We may be peripherally aware, for example, that some annoyance is arising. This is very different from having the thought, "I am annoyed." Strong peripheral awareness helps tone down the self-centered tendencies of attention, making perception more objective. *But when peripheral awareness fades, the way we perceive things becomes self-centered and distorted.*

Finally, attention and peripheral awareness can be either ***extrospective*** or ***introspective***. Extrospective means that attention or awareness is directed toward objects that come from outside your mind, such as sights, smells, or bodily sensations. Introspective means the objects in consciousness are internal—thoughts, feelings, states, and activities of mind. Even though attention and awareness can be either extrospective or introspective, *only peripheral awareness can observe the overall state of mind* (e.g., whether it is happy, peaceful, or agitated), *as well as the activities of the mind* (e.g., whether attention is moving or not, and whether attention is occupied with thinking, remembering, or listening). The condition in which the mind "stands back" to observe its own state

and activities is called ***metacognitive introspective awareness***.[13] Attention, on the other hand, can't observe activities of the mind because its movements and abstracting of information from awareness *are* activities of the mind. In other words, we can't attend to attention. When attention is focused on remembering, for example, you can't also use attention to know you're remembering. But you can be *aware* that you're remembering. Also, because attention works by isolating objects, it cannot observe overall states of the mind. If you do turn your attention introspectively, it takes a "snapshot" from peripheral awareness of your mental state right before you looked. Say someone asks, "How do you feel?" When you look inside, attention tries to transform awareness of your overall mental state into a specific conceptual thought, like, "I am happy."

Now that we've seen how different yet interdependent attention and peripheral awareness are, the importance of having both is obvious. We are responding to *something* in almost every waking moment, whether it comes from the environment or from within our own mind. Those responses include not just our words and actions, but

Figure 9. Introspective peripheral awareness means the objects in consciousness are internal—thoughts, feelings, states, and activities of mind.

Thus we lose mindfulness whenever our attention shifts rapidly back and forth between different objects, such as when multitasking.[16] Emotional stress causes the same thing to happen—we have so many worries and concerns competing for attention that we lose perspective. And, of course, dullness also robs us of the conscious power necessary for mindfulness. On the other hand, when we're in a relaxed state, awareness tends to open and the intensity of attention dissipates. Relax even more and attention increasingly fades. More often than not, dullness sets in. Because attention and awareness draw from the same limited capacity for consciousness, when one grows brighter the other becomes dimmer, resulting in suboptimal performance and loss of mindfulness.

Attention and awareness draw from the same limited capacity for consciousness. The goal is to increase the total power of consciousness available for both.

Proper training in mindfulness changes this equation, providing more conscious power for optimal interaction, and no more trade-offs. The goal, therefore, is *to increase the total power of consciousness available for both attention and awareness.* The result is peripheral awareness that is clearer, and attention that gets used more appropriately: purposefully, in the present moment, and without becoming bogged down in judgment and projection.

INCREASING THE POWER OF MINDFULNESS

Increasing the power of consciousness isn't a mysterious process. It's a lot like weight training. You simply do exercises where you practice sustaining close attention and strong peripheral awareness *at the same time*. This is the only way to make consciousness more powerful. The more vivid you can make your attention while still sustaining awareness, the more power you will gain. You will learn a number of different exercises as you move through the Stages. In the higher Stages of meditation, attention and awareness actually merge together to become one fully integrated system—more about that in the chapter on Stage Eight.

Like strengthening a muscle, developing powerful mindfulness involves enhancing a natural capacity that we all have.

Like strengthening a muscle, developing powerful mindfulness involves enhancing a natural capacity we all have. Just reflect for a moment on how your alertness and clarity of mind change throughout the day. Sometimes we feel quite sharp, energetic, and lucid. A life-threatening situation is an exceptional example of this. Time slows down. We become finely attuned to every little detail—every color, shape, sound, and sensation is vivid. Sometimes we may have the feeling of being an outside observer just watching the events unfold. Athletes refer to this kind of hyperconscious state as being "in the zone."

This is one extreme. On the other end of the spectrum, there are times during the day when we feel sluggish. A lack of mental energy leads to dullness, and then to drowsiness. In these kinds of states, we miss much of what's happening around us, and often misinterpret what we are able to perceive. Severe fatigue or alcohol can cause extreme dullness. Deep sleep is the ultimate state of dullness.

These varying experiences show the range of the conscious capabilities of our minds. Compare your normal level of consciousness with that of an athlete in the zone, or with a person in an emergency. You'll realize that daily life consists mostly of different degrees of dullness and mindlessness. As you progress through each Stage in this practice, you move steadily away from dullness toward enhanced states of consciousness that support increased mindfulness.

In this practice, you move steadily away from dullness toward enhanced states of consciousness that support increased mindfulness.

Having more conscious power means the *quality* of both attention and peripheral awareness improves. This transforms the interaction between them in a number of important ways:

- Peripheral awareness doesn't fade when attention is very focused.
- Peripheral awareness does a better job of providing context and makes you more sensitive to how objects relate to each other, and to the whole.
- Peripheral awareness processes information more thoroughly, making it better at selecting appropriate objects for attention to focus on.
- Attention is always directed toward the most important objects.
- Attention becomes clearer, more intense, and can analyze things more effectively.
- Because peripheral awareness is more powerful, attention doesn't get stuck in subjectivity and projection. Perception is more objective, and has more of the "seeing things as they are" quality of awareness.

How Mindfulness Progresses Through the Ten Stages

Throughout the Stages of meditation, you systematically train your attention and peripheral awareness in order to develop mindfulness. This is a matter of both skill development and increasing the total power of consciousness. As you progress, I will introduce new techniques and

guidance in each Stage to help you more fully develop both skill in mindfulness and power of consciousness.

This training starts in Stage Three. You practice focusing more and more closely on the meditation object while sustaining extrospective awareness. In Stages Four through Six, as the clarity and stability of attention improve dramatically, the emphasis will be on developing strong introspective awareness.[17] At Stage Five, you specifically aim to increase the power of consciousness by trying to detect very subtle sensations without losing awareness. In Stage Six, you further increase conscious power by dramatically expanding the scope of your attention to include the entire body, while still trying to detect very subtle sensations. By the end of Stage Six, your attention is extremely stable, and you have perfected ***metacognitive introspective awareness***, the ability to continuously observe the state and activity of the mind. In Stage Seven, you practice narrowing the scope way down, honing in on the constantly changing details of sensations, bringing the power of consciousness to its fullest development by Stage Eight.[18]

The Benefits of Mindfulness

With mindfulness, life becomes richer and more satisfying. You don't take things personally. Attention plays an appropriate role within the context of a broad and powerful awareness.

When you have cultivated mindfulness, life becomes richer, more vivid, more satisfying, and you don't take everything that happens so personally. Attention plays a more appropriate role within the greater context of a broad and powerful awareness. You're fully present, happier, and at ease, because you're not so easily caught up in the stories and melodramas the mind likes to concoct. Your powers of attention are used more appropriately and effectively to examine the world. You become more objective and clear-headed, and develop an enhanced awareness of the whole. When all these factors are ripe, you're ready for profound ***Insight*** into the true nature of reality. These are the extraordinary benefits of mindfulness.

SUMMARY

The two main objectives of meditation practice are:

- Developing stable attention.
- Cultivating powerful mindfulness that optimizes the interaction between attention and awareness.

A famous analogy in Zen compares the mind to a pool of water. This is a helpful way to think about the training and goals of meditation. If the water is agitated, churned up by wind and currents, it doesn't provide a clear reflection, nor can we see to the bottom. But as the water calms, the debris that made the pool muddy begins to settle, and the water itself becomes clear. A calm pool also reflects the sky and clouds perfectly.

In the same way, if the mind is agitated, disturbed by the concerns of daily life, it doesn't accurately reflect experience. Instead, we're caught up in projections and lack perspective. The inner workings of the mind remain murky as well, full of mental debris that clutters our thinking. Developing stable attention is the key to making the water calm, settled, and pure. Mindfulness is like the sunlight that illuminates the surface, as well as the depths.

Don't forget, however, that the path is as important as the goal. The Stages outlined in this book may bring you to a state of peace and Insight, but they are also an exciting journey of discovery into the nature of the mind. Relish in this beautiful and sometimes challenging journey. The goal isn't just getting to a calm, quiet pool, but learning about the makeup of the water itself as it goes from choppy to still, from cloudy to crystal-clear.

is a powerful tool for setting realistic goals, so periodically revisit the Overview.

3. BEWARE OF EXPECTATIONS

You should set goals and practice diligently to achieve them, but be careful of ambitious expectations about where you "should be." You can easily set yourself up for disappointment. Resolve to hold the goals you've set *very lightly*, to find enjoyment in every meditation no matter what happens, and to savor any achievement. Simply sitting down to practice is an accomplishment.

There will be sessions where it's easy to focus. This is the fruit of your previous practice. But don't expect to notice obvious progress each time you sit. There will be plateaus where nothing seems to change for days or weeks. Today, you may have less stability of attention or mindfulness than you did weeks or even months ago. That's normal, so stay relaxed. Make your effort diligent, yet joyful. Don't get caught up in expectations. And always remember, there is no such thing as a "bad" meditation.

4. COMMIT TO DILIGENCE

Diligence means engaging wholeheartedly in the practice rather than spending your time on the cushion planning or daydreaming. You will be tempted to think about things that are more interesting or "important" than the meditation object—problems to be solved, projects to plan, and fantasies to entertain. So commit not to indulge in these tempting distractions. Also, judging the quality of your practice can lead to doubt, giving rise to procrastination and resistance (see "Obstacles to Establishing a Practice" later in this chapter). Remind yourself that, whenever resistance arises, the best way to overcome it is by simply continuing to practice. Resolve to practice diligently for the entire session, regardless of how your meditation goes.

5. REVIEW POTENTIAL DISTRACTIONS

It's important to know your state of mind before you begin to meditate. Perform a quick inventory of the things in your life that could come up as distractions, such as a problem at work or an argument with a friend. Check to see if your mind is occupied by any worries about the future, regrets about the past, doubts, or other annoyances.

(It will help to review the Five Hindrances described in the Second Interlude.) Acknowledge these thoughts and emotions, whatever they are, and resolve to set them aside if they arise. You may not be wholly successful, but just setting the intention will make them easier to handle.

6. ADJUST YOUR POSTURE

Before you begin, review your posture and get comfortable. Here's a checklist:

- Adjust any supports you use to help you sit comfortably.
- Your head, neck, and back should be aligned, leaning neither forward nor backward, nor to the side.
- Your shoulders should be even and your hands level with each other so your muscles are balanced.
- Your lips should be closed, your teeth slightly apart, and your tongue against the roof of your mouth, with the tip against the back of your upper teeth.
- Start with your eyes closed and angled slightly downward, as though you were reading a book. This creates the least tension in your forehead and face. If you prefer, leave your eyes slightly open, with your gaze directed at the floor in front of you. Your eyes will move during meditation, but when you notice they've shifted, return them to where they were.
- With your lips closed, breathe through your nose in a natural way. It shouldn't feel controlled or forced.
- Relax and enjoy yourself. Scan your body for any tension and let it go. All the activity of meditation is in the mind, so the body should be like a lump of soft clay—solid and stable, but completely pliant. This helps keep physical distractions to a minimum. (For more on how to sit, see "The Right Posture" later in this chapter.)

It doesn't matter how long you spend on the Preparation for Meditation, because it is a form of meditation. If your mind wanders, bring it back using the techniques described for breath meditation. The more often you do it, the faster it goes.

Sometimes new students say, "I seem to spend a lot of time just doing the 'Preparation for Practice'—is that a problem?" When I ask how the rest of their meditation went afterward, that usually answers the question. By the time you go through the Six Points, your mind will be well settled. The preparation also helps establish a consistent practice, free from resistance and the deliberate wasting of time. And it doesn't matter how long you spend on the preparation, because it, too, is a form of meditation in which you still intentionally direct and sustain attention. If your mind wanders, bring it back using the same techniques we describe in the next section on breath meditation. After doing the preparation every day for a while, it will go much more quickly.

The Meditation Object

A meditation object is something you intentionally choose to be the focus of your attention during meditation. Although you can choose just about anything, the breath is ideal for cultivating attention and mindfulness. First, the breath is always with you. Second, it allows you to be a completely passive observer. You don't need to do anything, such as repeat a mantra, generate a visualization, or rely on any special item like a candle, icon, or *kasiṇa*.[1] You can meditate on the breath at any opportunity, wherever you are, every day—even up to your dying breath. The breath also changes over time, becoming fainter as concentration deepens. This makes it suitable for developing powerful attention, since the details you focus on become ever more subtle as sensations grow less distinct. Likewise, the fact that sensations change continuously, moment by moment, is conducive to ***Insight*** into the nature of impermanence. Yet, the breath also constantly repeats itself, over and over in the same pattern, making it suitable as a fixed (i.e., relatively unchanging) meditation object for entering states of meditative absorption. Because of these different qualities, the breath is used as the basis for the practice of Tranquility and Insight (*śamatha-vipassanā*), dry Insight practices (*sukkha-vipassanā*), and meditative absorptions (*jhāna*).

When we refer to the "breath" as the meditation object, we mean the sensations produced by breathing.

Whenever we refer to the "breath" as the meditation object, we actually mean the *sensations* produced by breathing, not some visualization or idea of the breath going in and out. When I direct you to observe the "breath" in the chest or abdomen, I mean the sensations of movement, pressure, and touch occurring there as you breathe in and out. When I

say the "breath at the nose," I mean the sensations of temperature, pressure, and air moving on the skin anywhere around the tip of the nose, the rim, inside the nostrils, or on the upper lip just below the nostrils.

Throughout the Ten Stages, your meditation object will most often be the breath sensations at the nose, but not always. Some suggest using the sensations of rising and falling at the abdomen instead. Beginners often find the large movements of the abdomen easier to follow at first. But when the breath becomes very shallow, the coarser sensitivity at the abdomen can make it harder to detect the breath sensations. I recommend the nose because the nerve endings there are much more sensitive.[2] Choose whatever area around the nostrils works best for you.

Although the breath as meditation object has many benefits, the same principles and methods apply to any meditation object, and most other meditation techniques.

Even though the breath has many benefits, the methods presented in the Ten Stages can also be used with a visualized object, a mantra, or in loving-kindness practices. All the same principles can be employed in conjunction with the noting technique of the Mahasi-style *vipassanā* method, the breath concentration and body-scanning techniques of the U Ba Khin/Goenka *vipassanā* method, or the uniquely systematic *vipassanā* of Shinzen Young. In each of these, you face the same problems of ***mind-wandering***, ***distraction***, and ***dullness***, which the techniques here are designed to address. That said, not every meditation object leads to the final Stages as surely as do the sensations of the breath.

A Gradual Four-Step Transition to the Meditation Object

In this practice, you transition gently from the free-ranging attention of daily life to focusing on the breath at the nose. The transition is spread over four steps. In each, you define a specific "domain" or "space" in which you allow your attention to range freely. Any object in the space can serve as the focus of your attention at any moment, meaning your focus just moves as it will. As you proceed from step to step, you further restrict the space in which attention is free to move, until you're finally focused on the sensations of the breath at the nose. But as you make this transition with attention, remember to always maintain peripheral awareness. Every step in the transition provides a good opportunity to learn to distinguish between attention and awareness. Treat this as a serious practice, not just as a nice way to start a meditation. Use it each time you sit down to meditate, especially if you're a beginner.

hand, some thoughts, such as how to make your posture more comfortable, can help you settle into the present.

In general, mindfully observing thoughts is tricky, so it's better to focus on sounds, smells, and physical sensations to avoid being hooked by thoughts. A helpful phrase to remember when dealing with distractions of any kind is, *let it come, let it be, let it go*. Don't try to suppress it, just *let it come* into peripheral awareness. Don't engage the distraction or focus attention on it, simply disregard it and *let it be* in the background. Then, *let it go* away by itself. This is a passive process. There is nothing to "do" but allow these objects to arise and pass away on their own, moment by moment. When you find your attention has been captured by a thought, just come back to the present.

STEP TWO: FOCUS ON BODILY SENSATIONS

Once you have become fully present with every kind of sensory stimulus, limit your attention to bodily sensations. These include all physical sensations arising on or in the body, such as touch, pressure, warmth, coolness, movement, tingling, deep visceral sensations like a rumbling in your stomach, and so forth. With your *attention* limited to bodily sensations, let everything else slip into the background of *peripheral awareness*. Nothing should be suppressed or excluded from your field of conscious awareness. Just let sounds, smells, and thoughts keep circulating in the background, but don't focus on them. Let them come, let them be, and let them go in peripheral awareness while you restrict all movements of attention to bodily sensations. Whenever you notice your attention going to a sound or thought, bring it back to the body.

As you pay more attention to your body, release any tension you find and make final adjustments to your posture. Again, notice any pleasant sensations, distinguishing between the sensation as sensation and your mind's reaction to it, and spend a few moments enjoying the pleasure. These pleasant sensations might include feelings of air moving over the skin, warmth or coolness, and the softness or supportive firmness of the meditation cushion. You may experience pleasant sensations deeper in your muscles and joints as you relax, or warm feelings in your chest and abdomen. There may simply be an overall pleasant sense of stillness and peace. Whatever the sensations, enjoy and explore them freely.

For a beginner, it can be hard to relax at first because your mind is agitated and your body is unaccustomed to staying still for long.

When you start feeling restless or your sense of contentment fades, then thoughts, memories, and emotions will begin to stir. Don't get annoyed or try to suppress them. Instead, return to step one, broadening your awareness until you become fully present with everything happening in the moment again. In particular, seek out the pleasurable aspects of the present and try to reestablish and reinforce feelings of contentment and happiness. Repeat this process of backing off and starting over as often as needed until the mind can rest easily with your attention focused *only* on bodily sensations. There is no need to hurry on to the next step.

If you never get past step two during your entire meditation session, that's perfectly fine. However, sometimes focusing in more can also help you settle down, so don't hesitate to try moving to the next step. You can always return to this one if narrowing your focus doesn't work.

STEP THREE: FOCUS ON BODILY SENSATIONS RELATED TO THE BREATH.

As you sit quietly observing the body, your attention will naturally gravitate toward the sensations of movement produced by breathing, since little else changes while sitting quietly. As you tune in, start paying attention to all the different kinds of breath-related sensations. You will notice them especially around your nose, face, chest, and abdomen. You may find sensations of movement caused by the breath in your upper arms and shoulders, or elsewhere. Take your time to become familiar with all these breath-related sensations. In particular, savor any pleasant qualities associated with them. You may notice the mind becomes mildly invigorated during the in-breath, while the out-breath feels more relaxing and soothing.

Without suppressing anything else in your field of conscious awareness, restrict your attention to these breath-related sensations. Once you settle in, start focusing more directly on the sensations of the breath in specific areas. Closely observe the rise and fall of the abdomen, then the expansion and contraction of the chest, then the sensations produced by air moving in and out of the nostrils. Allow your mind to move freely among the abdomen, chest, nose, and anywhere else where you feel breath-related sensations.

It's important to breathe naturally. Be a passive observer, noticing any sensations that happen to be present. You don't have to exaggerate the breath to make sensations easier to notice. If you want to perceive them more clearly, try imagining that you're looking at the place where