

Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation (Anapanasati)

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This practice, in one form or another, is very widespread in the Buddhist world. The particular form taught here -- in four stages -- is found in the Visuddhimagga (Path of Purity) of the great Theravadin scholar, Buddhaghosa. This particular version of the Mindfulness of Breathing is mainly aimed to calm and focus the mind, and is therefore what is known as a samatha (Sanskrit, shamatha) practice rather than a vipassana. The Sanskrit equivalent is vipashyana, or insight, practice, although it's easy to bring elements of insight into it.

There are other traditional forms that are widely practiced, especially in the insight meditation traditions, but I've found this one to be particularly suitable for complete beginners. The first two stages especially, which involve counting, are very helpful in stabilizing the mind.

More experienced practitioners can feel free to adapt the practice to their own needs, shortening or even dropping some stages, and extending others.

Anapanasati simply means mindfulness (sati) of breathing (pana) in and out. This is a meditation practice where we use the breath as the object of attention to which we return every time we notice that the mind has wandered.

Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation: Introduction

In the mindfulness of breathing we use the breath as an object of awareness. We follow the physical sensations of the breath as it flows in and out of the body.

This meditation practice isn't a breathing exercise. We allow the breath to flow naturally and are simply aware of it. So there is no control over the breath.

One of the first things we learn when we try to do this meditation practice is how distracted our minds are! All sorts of thoughts and feelings flow into our awareness, and then we find we've forgotten all about the breath. This is a good thing to learn. If we don't know this we can't do anything about it.

Most of what comes into our minds is not very useful, and often it's actually bad for us. For example we find ourselves worrying or getting angry, or putting ourselves down.

The simple principle behind this meditation practice is that if we keep taking our awareness back to the breath -- over and over again -- then our mind gradually quiets down and we feel more contentment.

Usually we do this with the eyes shut, to minimize distraction.

You'll need to know how to sit effectively, so you can either go to the meditation posture guidelines or, if you already know how to sit, then go directly to the meditation practice.

Use the links on the left to navigate round the practice. If this is your first time practicing the Mindfulness of Breathing, then start with stage one.

Background information: What we do in the Mindfulness of Breathing

In the mindfulness of breathing we give the breath our full attention. We use the physical sensations of the breath as an object that we focus on. We just allow the breath to happen. This is not a breathing exercise. We simply observe, and see what happens.

So, we start off by following the breath. After a while what tends to happen is that we forget all about the breath, forget all about meditation, and get distracted by some train of thought, which is often nothing at all to do with meditation. We don't usually make any conscious decision to think about something outside of the meditation practice. It just happens as habitual patterns of behavior come into play. In fact, not only do we not choose to get distracted, we don't have much choice at all!

Becoming Unaware

Our habits are controlling us. . It's more like our thoughts are thinking us than we are thinking them. So one of the first things we learn in meditation is just how little control we do have - it's quite a disconcerting realization for many of us. However, the fact that we often aren't in control isn't cause to become despondent - it's the same for most of us most of the time. And we have to become aware of how distracted we are before we can do anything about it.

Question: So what do we do when we're meant to be meditating, but aren't?

Often we're getting irritated, or fantasizing about things we'd rather be doing, or undermining ourselves, or dozing, or worrying about something. Most of these activities aren't very helpful or fulfilling. They're not things we decided to do, they're simply the habitual things we do when we're not aware. The things we do when we're meant to be meditating but aren't, are called the hindrances to meditation, and we'll be exploring them in more detail in later classes. As well as learning about them we'll learn a whole bunch of tools to help us deal with them.

The difference between being mindful and not being mindful is a big one, although we're often not very good at recognizing the difference between the two states. After all, we slip in and out of awareness all day. But there really is a big difference between being mindful and not being mindful, as we'll learn to see.

Regaining Awareness

So we get distracted, but at some point we become aware that we haven't been aware. In other words we regain our awareness. This is a crucial point in the meditation process. Now we're aware again. Now we're no longer being driven by our habits. We have freedom again. We can decide that we don't want to re-enter the world of distractedness. We have choice. We can choose to exercise being aware rather than be dominated by our habitual distracted states of mind. We have an opportunity to cultivate awareness by maintaining our mindfulness of the breath. When we realize we've been distracted we can take our awareness back to the breath.

Making choices

But there's another important opportunity available to us at the point when we regain our awareness. We can choose not only what we do (taking our awareness to the breath), but how we do it. There can be a strong temptation to beat ourselves up over having been distracted. Of course if we do that then we're going straight back into an uncontrolled, unaware state of distractedness -- we undermine ourselves or get annoyed. A more creative response is that we take our awareness back to the breath with as much kindness, and patience, and gentleness as we can. Instead of giving yourself a hard time about having been distracted you can congratulate yourself on having regained your awareness.

When you're taking your awareness back to the breath, bear in mind that your mind is a miraculous and precious thing. Carry your awareness back to the breath in the same way as you would pick up a young kitten in order to return it to its mother. Try and be that gentle and that kind. Your mind has a natural tendency to wander, just like a young, inquisitive animal. So there's no point in being harsh with yourself. The meditation practice we'll be learning after we've practiced the Mindfulness of breathing for a few weeks is called the metta bhavana, and it's all about bringing more of those qualities of kindness and appreciation into our lives.

The Benefits of the Meditation Practice

Developing Awareness

So we go back to the breath, and that has a number of important benefits. The breath becomes a kind of anchor that helps us to stay in awareness. We're practicing recognizing the difference between awareness and unawareness. We're also working on developing those qualities of patience, kindness, and gentleness that are so important when we realize when we've been unaware - when we've just come out of being distracted and have regained our awareness.

And we're also training ourselves to stay out of the hindrances. Becoming distracted is a bit like falling over when you're a little kid. When we try to follow the breath it's like we've decided to walk. But then after a few steps we stumble and get distracted. But we keep picking ourselves up by going back to the breath. The way kids learn to walk is by taking a few steps, falling over, and picking themselves up over and over again. The way we learn to be more aware is by following the breath, getting distracted, and then going back to the breath - over and over and over again.

Developing Calmness

I've mentioned that the hindrances are not very satisfying states of mind. Being annoyed, or fantasizing, or undermining ourselves, all involve a lot of mental disharmony. They cause turbulence in our minds, and so we find that we're not very calm. Learning to spend less time in the hindrances means that we develop a calmer mind.

Becoming More Content

The hindrances are also not states in which we're very happy. If we're fantasizing, for example -- either about things we'd rather be doing, or about things we're not happy about -- then there's emotional disharmony since we're not happy what we're doing. Spending less time in distracted states of mind means that we become more content.

Developing Concentration

And when we're distracted then we're not very concentrated - our mind is jumping from one topic to another like a butterfly. This means we don't experience anything very deeply - like when we're talking to someone and we're also preoccupied and realize they've been talking but we don't know what they've said. Or when we're eating handfuls of raisins but not really tasting them because we're reading and the radio is on. That kind of thing doesn't help us connect very deeply with our experience. And how can we reflect if we can't keep up a focused train of thought? And if we can't reflect then how do we learn? Practicing mindfulness helps us to be more concentrated so that we can live more deeply, and appreciate life more fully. Later, we'll also be looking more closely at calm, contentment, and concentration and looking at ways we can cultivate those qualities more directly, as part of the tool-kit of methods we're developing to work with our mind.

Overview of the Mindfulness of Breathing Practice

After you've read this you can work your way through the practice one stage at a time, reading the background information we offer, and listening to the guided meditations on RealAudio.

The Mindfulness of Breathing practice is in four stages. After setting up your posture you become aware of the physical sensations of your breath. Whenever your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the breath. Then:

Stage One: Count after each out breath. Start at one, placing one number after each exhalation. When you get to ten, then start again at one.

Stage Two: Do the same as in the first stage, but counting just before each in breath.

Stage Three: Drop the counting, and just follow the breath as it flows in and out.

Stage Four: Narrow your focus until you are concentrating on the sensations of the breath flowing over the rims of your nostrils.

Stage 0

Before we can start on Stage 1, we need to do some essential preparation -- what I call "Stage 0". Stage 0 involves setting up your meditation posture, then taking your awareness through your body relaxing as much as you can. You might find it beneficial to read a fuller description of the background and practice of this important stage before beginning Stage One.

Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation: Stage 1 - Counting the Breath

Once you've taken a tour of your whole body, begin to focus on the physical sensations of your breath. Let yourself become absorbed in the sensations of the breath flowing in and out of your body. Notice how the sensations are always changing.

Then begin counting (internally) after every out-breath:

Breathe in - breathe out - 1

Breathe in - breathe out - 2

Breathe in - breathe out - 3

Breathe in - breathe out - 4

Breathe in - breathe out - 5

... and so on until you reach ten. Once you get to ten, start again at one. Keep following the breath, and counting, for at least five minutes.

If your mind wanders, just come back to experiencing the physical sensations of the breath, and begin counting again.

Bring as much patience into the process as possible.

More on Stage One

Just tried the first stage of the Mindfulness of Breathing?

Kinda anxious about getting on to stage two?

Okay. Why not consolidate what you've already learned, rather than rushing on to do the whole practice as quickly as possible? Heck, the chances are you want to learn to meditate because life is so rushed and hectic, so why not start to relax. What's the rush? Hang loose!

Try doing the first stage of the practice for a few days. Maybe even try to do it more than once every day. Why not take a few minutes now to plan exactly when you're going to do it?

We suggest you try five to ten minutes in the morning, and the same in the evening, just before you go to bed. Or maybe a few minutes on your lunch-break? There's no right or wrong time to meditate, so see what suits you.

So try that for maybe three days, and then come back and learn the second stage. Give that a few days (doing both stages) and then come back again. And so on. While you're exploring stage one, you can try to answer any questions you have by exploring the site, and explore the links on this page that deal with stage one.

What does this practice do?

In the short term, the Mindfulness of Breathing practice helps us to become more calm and (rather paradoxically) to become more energized and refreshed. In the long term, it helps us to develop more awareness so that we have more freedom to choose what our responses are going to be in any given situation. This means, for example, that we can find ourselves in a situation that would normally make us anxious, but we can choose instead to cultivate patience and calmness.

Practicing mindfulness is enormously enriching. Instead of being half-aware of what we're doing, we can fully and richly experience every moment of our lives. The mindfulness that we develop in this practice will help us to enjoy our food more, will help us to concentrate better at work, and will help us to be more present when we're talking to our friends. And many people who do this practice last thing at night say that it helps them to sleep and that their dreams are richer.

What's the counting for?

The counting has a number of really useful functions (almost as useful as the breathing, really!).

It's very easy just to "space out" instead of actually meditating. When we space out we get distracted without realizing it. The counting helps to give us a more objective sense of how much of the time we're distracted, and how much we're remaining aware.

Counting allows us to "measure" how long we're maintaining our awareness. Sometimes it's hard to stay focused on the breath even for three breaths. Other times we can be aware for several cycles of ten breaths. So you can tell if it's a "good day" or a "bad day."

Counting gives us something to aim for. It's good to have goals. If you're getting distracted before getting to the tenth breath then you can try hard to reach ten. If you make it that far then you can try to get to ten again. Without the counting it's hard to have any sense of what you're working towards.

The numbers help us to see if we're making progress. If you put the effort into your meditation practice then you'll see results. But how can you see results if there's nothing to measure them by?

The numbers subtly alter your perception of the breath. When you count after the out-breath then that's the part of the breathing process that you're most aware of. So in the first stage of the practice you're more aware of breathing out. We'll talk more about this after you've done the second stage of the practice.

Keep getting distracted?

Everyone gets distracted during meditation -- even people who've been meditating for years. You're in good company.

The first stage in creating a beautiful garden is to realize how many weeds there are to be cleared up. If you feel a bit daunted by the sheer volume of trivia that your mind seems capable of creating then it's good to remember that you need to know it's there before you can do anything about it. Also bear in mind that dealing with it will bring you happiness.

It's as if you've just inherited a beautiful garden, which is full of weeds. You can't just pretend that the weeds aren't there -- you have to do something about it. With a real garden you could always just get rid of it or hire someone to look after it. With your

mind you don't have that luxury. Leave it alone and it will just get worse. The best thing to do is get started as soon as possible on clearing those mind-weeds.

If you ever feel frustration with your distractions, then remember that when you realize you've been distracted in meditation you have a choice -- you can choose to exercise patience and gentleness with yourself. Getting mad or getting despondent will only make things worse.

So chill, and patiently continue working at clearing the weeds from your wild mind.

The numbers won't stay with the breath

Many people find that the number won't stay put. It merges with the out-breath so that you're sort of exhaling the numbers. I think that's fine. The first stage is more connected with the out-breath anyway, and the fact that the number has a way of integrating itself into the exhalation just reinforces that association.

Having said that, I think it's good to work at getting the number to go where it's "supposed" to go -- in the space between the out-breath and the in-breath. There are good reasons for this that we've gone into elsewhere.

Timing the stages

Beginners often assume that timing how long they are meditating for will be very distracting. They sometimes wonder if they should use an alarm clock, or some other mechanical method. Actually, an alarm clock or beeper might be rather jarring and unpleasant. Most meditators just have a clock or watch sitting in front of them. They'll open their eyes from time to time and see how long they've been sitting.

It really isn't a great distraction. Just make sure to place your clock or watch somewhere that you can see it without having to change the angle of your head or move your eyes.

Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation: Stage Two

Preparation

Set up your posture, as described in the posture guidelines.

Stage One

Then, spend a few minutes doing the first stage of the practice, counting after each out-breath in cycles of one to ten. (If you haven't done the first stage of the practice, then we strongly recommend that you go back and review that section before trying it). When you feel you've begun to calm your mind down a little, move on to the second stage of the practice.

Stage Two

In the second stage of the practice we continue to count in cycles of ten breaths, the difference being that this time we count just before each inhalation. Whenever you regain your awareness after being distracted, take your mind gently back to the breath.

More on Stage Two

Now you've tried the first two stages of the practice, we recommend that you spend a few days practicing them together, and appreciating the subtle differences between them.

Once you've done that, feel free to come back and try stage three.

As you're practicing stages one and two together, you can return to the site and explore around these stages to answer any questions you might have.

The difference between stages one and two

If you've tried the first two stages of the Mindfulness of Breathing, you'll almost certainly have noticed that they feel very different from one another. Most people find that.

You might have enjoyed one stage more than another (although people differ about which is the most enjoyable stage).

And if you enjoyed one stage more than another, you might even have found there was one stage you really didn't like (that's most often the second stage, for reasons we'll come to).

But the interesting thing is that both stages are structurally identical. How can that be! In the first stage you count after the out-breath, while in the second stage we count before the in-breath! It's patently obvious they're different! Let me explain.

The structure of the first stage

The first stage looks like this:

In - out - 1 - in - out - 2 - in - out - 3 - in - out - 4 - in - out - 5 etc.

The structure of the second stage

While the second stage looks like this:

1 - in - out - 2 - in - out - 3 - in - out - 4 - in - out - 5 etc.

The first two stages compared

Now, if you line both stages up, it looks like this

1 - in - out - 2 - in - out - 3 - in - out - 4 - in - out - 5 etc.

1 - in - out - 2 - in - out - 3 - in - out - 4 - in - out - 5 etc.

Why the stages feel different

The reason is that where you place the numbers (or more accurately, where you think you're placing the numbers) changes which part of the breath you're most aware of. In the first stage, because you're counting after the out-breath your mind links the counting with the out-breath.

Try taking a deep breath and letting it out. Go on, no-one's watching. How does it feel? It feels like:

- * letting go
- * relaxing
- * moving downward
- * calming

Taking a deep out-breath (known to us professional breathers as "sighing") is what we do when we let go of tension -- you know, that moment you go "pew" when you wake up and find that you don't have to go back to school to take the exam you've just been dreaming about.

Now in the second stage, you're counting before the in-breath and so your mind links the number more closely to the act of breathing in. So what does breathing in feel like? Try it. Do a big inhalation (remember to breath out at some point). It feels like:

- * expanding
- * opening up
- * rising
- * energizing

Relaxing before energizing

Breathing deeply in is what you naturally do when you wake up on the first day of vacation, step out onto the balcony of your luxury hotel overlooking the ocean, and it feels good to be alive (as opposed to being in the office).

So while the first stage is a stage of letting go, the second stage is a stage of energizing. The first stage is the perfect thing to do in starting a meditation practice -- we let go (hopefully) of all the tension in our bodies and (even more hopefully) of all the crud flying round in our heads.

Once we've done that, the next stage (the second stage) is where you attempt to energize your relaxed mind and body. By encouraging your body to open up, and by feeling the energy that comes with the in-breath, you help to set up the conditions for being aware. Maintaining your awareness requires an upright alert body, and an open chest (see Posture Guidelines for more detail). That's exactly what happens in the second stage.

Bored with the counting?

Sometimes people find the counting boring, and want to drop it. Well, there can be good reasons and bad reasons for wanting to drop the counting.

Sometimes we've really developed a strong current of stillness and it seems natural to drop the numbers. If so, then just let go of the counting and enjoy that undistracted bliss. But often it's just a resistance to structure, or the desire to be passive. We'd rather just daydream. Be honest about what your motivation is.

If the numbers seem mechanical, then bear in mind that this is not inevitable -- it's a product of the way your mind is working. If you approach the numbers mechanically, then they'll seem mechanical. On the other hand, if you approach the numbers gracefully and creatively, then they'll seem natural and fluid. One way to contact that natural fluidity is to place the number very lightly before or after the breath. Imagine that you're kissing the cheek of a sleeping child. You want to make contact, but you don't want to cause any disturbance. Place the numbers tenderly, and with care.

If your mind is very distracted however, then make the numbers more definite and firm. But still try to do it with care. This time it's more like giving a massage -- making more definite, weighty contact -- rather than kissing a child, which is a much more delicate gesture. The firm count should still be done sensitively -- like the firm but responsive pressure you would apply when massaging a friend's shoulders.

Second stage feels awkward?

The first stage is meant to be more relaxing, while the second stage is invigorating, and promotes awareness.

If you haven't managed to develop enough relaxation, then the second stage can feel a little stiff and awkward at first. The problem is probably that you're exercising some kind of subtle control over your breath. Breathing is one of these things that's best done automatically.

In the first stage of the practice we're just acknowledging the sensation, because we count after the out-breath. So there's less possibility of trying to control the breath -- you can't control what's in the past. But in the second stage there is a sense of anticipation -- and it is possible to control what's about to happen. When your desire to control events meets a sense of anticipation, then you find yourself taking charge of the breathing, rather than just watching it.

Since your unconscious is much better at regulating your breathing than your conscious mind is, you find that your breathing is a bit stiff.

This problem will sort itself out soon. You'll find that you relax into the second stage if you just patiently keep working at it. At some point you'll get a bit more concentrated and "forget" to control your breath.

However, if you need to, you can always drop back into the first stage of the practice, and return to the second stage when you're more relaxed. Or you can consciously

work in the second stage to develop more relaxation by really letting go on the out-breath.

Counting on your fingers

This suggestion is not based on an assumption that you don't know how to count up to ten unaided! This is a useful technique that I've used when my mind has been very distracted and I need a bit of a hand to get it under control.

What I do is very simple; in the first two stages I count on my fingers as my breath flows in and out. I don't move my fingers but simply take my awareness into each finger in turn, starting with the thumb of my right hand, working my way through the fingers of that hand in turn, and then continuing from the thumb to the pinkie on my left hand.

This really does help to keep your mind more firmly anchored than when you simply follow the breath alone. So why not use this all the time? Well, you could, I suppose, but I find this technique mainly to be of use when I'm very distracted. Once I've managed to get my mind to settle down I let go of it. The reason I do this is because I find that counting on my fingers is effective but slightly crude as well. I think that if you relied too much on this method it would stop you from developing more refinement in your practice. Perhaps it would be like never getting beyond using stabilizers (training wheels) when learning to ride a bicycle.

Although I said that I don't move my fingers, I felt that I actually had to do so when I first tried out this method. Unless I physically moved my fingers a tiny bit I found I had difficulty telling which finger was which (and that's despite spending years trying to learn the trumpet).

Perhaps you won't have the same problem and can go straight onto counting your fingers without having to wiggle them. I stress that I don't do this all the time - I only use this method when my mind is particularly unruly and needs to be, well, taken in hand.

Stepping back from the process

At this point it may be a good idea to step back from learning meditation and reflect a little on how it's going. Learning meditation is not easy - in fact I think it's one of the more challenging and heroic things that a human being can choose to do with his or her life. Learning meditation involves learning to see ourselves - warts and all. It requires that we take responsibility for ourselves, rather than using other people as scapegoats for our own failings ("you made me angry").

There are always ups and downs in learning any skill. Anyone who's learned to do something like skiing, or roller-blading, or ice skating as an adult will remember thinking, "this is impossible", and regretting that we ever started. It can be like that with meditation as well, and I'd like to encourage you by reminding you that you are not alone and that you are going through a process that many other people have been through - and come out of the other side of.

One process that many people have been through is the discovery that meditation seems to give you problems you never thought you had. Before, you just had an irritating colleague. Now you realize that you are responsible for your own mental states and that your irritability is a construct of your own mind. Of course, meditation hasn't created this problem - it's just made you more aware that you have it. This can be a shock initially. At first it might seem that it would be more comfortable to retreat into unawareness - but that may not be an option. Once you've begun to realize that you are responsible for your own life and emotions, it's hard to lose that perspective. You've looked behind the curtain, realized that the wizard is a little old man pulling strings, and can never again see him as the all powerful Oz.

A related problem is getting more in touch with emotions that you hadn't previously fully acknowledged. Meditation can be a very accurate and unflattering mirror.

Without meditation it can be very easy to delude ourselves into seeing ourselves as being purer, more patient, more socially competent, or kinder than we actually are. Meditation polishes the mirror, and this too can be a shock to the system. Cynthia, a child psychiatrist from New England, commented: "I meditated today at the office and noticed that I can really slow down after meditating. I also noticed how irritable I was on arriving home when interacting with others. Ugh. I'm wishing I could be more mellow." This is a fairly common experience - slowing down enough to be able to see yourself in the mirror.

Another student made the same connection: "It may be just coincidental but I have felt quite emotional in a negative sort of way. I don't know if opening up in meditation has allowed an opportunity for my more repressed feelings to come to the surface (with some of the busyness out of the way)." This too is a phase that will pass. You'll still have a more accurate perception of yourself, but it will be tempered by a sense of the progress you're making. In a way, the mirror becomes four-dimensional so that you not only can see yourself as you are, but also as you were and as you will be. Seeing ourselves changing, and realizing what we can become, is the greatest antidote to self-doubt that I know of.

In the short term we need to have a sense of trust in the process. The path at first may seem to be hard and rocky, the way may seem almost impassable, but over time your stamina and resilience will improve, and so will your patience and forgiveness of yourself. The path has its own rewards.

Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation: Stage Three

Stage Zero

Set up your posture, as described in the posture guidelines.

Stages One and Two

Then, spend a few minutes doing the first two stages of the practice. When you feel ready, move onto the third stage

Stage Three

In the third stage of the practice, drop the counting, and just follow the breathing coming in and out

What's next?

OK, you know the score by now. Try doing all three stages for a few days. Practice them every day, if possible, and get to know them well.

Watch out for any tendency to want to skip over one stage (maybe because you don't like it as much as the others). Each stage has its own special function, so remember to do them in the correct order.

You might want to make your meditation a little longer now, perhaps five minutes per stage, making fifteen minutes.

Between the stages

Perhaps this is a good time to remind you of your body. I've emphasized that it's important to set up your posture at the start of a period of practice. Doing this provides you with better conditions for meditating. It's just like making sure that your kindling is stacked just right and that your matches are dry, so that you'll end up with a good blaze instead of a pile of smoldering wood and a bad temper.

But when you take your attention away from your posture in order to be more aware of your breath, you'll often find that your posture starts to drift. You might find that some parts of your body start to sag, while others become tense. And these changes lead to mental and emotional changes. The tension in your shoulders might be related

to some anger you've started to experience. The sagging in your spine might be related to a feeling of despair that's crept in. If you relax your shoulders, the anger will start to disappear again. If you straighten your spine, you'll start to feel more confident again.

As you become more proficient at meditation, you'll learn that you can periodically take your attention away from your breath for a split second in order to check your posture and make minor corrections. You'll get so good at doing this that you'll be able to effectively keep a continuous awareness of your breath. Remember learning to drive? You probably found that at first you'd take your attention off the road to change gears and when you took your attention back to the road (several long seconds later) you'd find that you'd drifted off towards one side or that a red traffic light had mysteriously appeared from nowhere. Later, you'll have found that you were able to change gears without significantly taking your awareness from what was going on around you.

The same thing happens in meditation - we learn to deal with the seeming complexity of managing our posture and what we're doing with the focus of our attention - elegantly and even effortlessly. A good way to start practicing this skill of monitoring your posture without disrupting your practice is to check and correct your posture in between stages.

You might want to do this every time you move from one stage to another. Later, you'll find that you can integrate monitoring your posture into your practice in the way that I've described.

Balancing alertness and relaxation

While stage one helps to develop more calm (by emphasizing the qualities of the out breath), and stage two helps to develop more energy and awareness (by emphasizing the qualities of the in breath), the third stage emphasizes both the in breath and the out breath equally. This helps us to blend the calm relaxation of the first stage with the energized awareness of the second stage.

Ideally, we are developing a sense of energetic calm awareness, or a calmly energized awareness. While doing stage three you can be aware of the constant oscillation between the calming out breath and the energizing in breath, and allow the qualities of the out breath and of the in breath to permeate each other.

Modifying an analogy the Buddha himself used, you can think about making dough. When you're making dough, what you're doing is taking two contrasting substances - a wet one and a dry one - and combining them together in a perfectly balanced blend. If you have too much water, then you'll have a sticky mess, while if you have too much flour, you'll have a dry, cracked ball. Get the proportions just right, and you'll have dough that is perfectly pliable and workable.

This stage of the mindfulness of breathing practice helps us to develop pliability of mind; to get our minds into a calm and energetic state where we can work to develop a much greater degree of concentration.

Signs of progress in meditation

When you're new to meditation you often need some reassurance that you're on the right path. Often it's hard to tell whether you are making progress or not. I emphasized earlier that one of the things that will help you to stick with your meditation practice is the ability to notice and appreciate small changes. So here are some of the small changes that you might want to watch out for.

Other people noticing that you are changing. Sometimes it's hard to have a sense of perspective on ourselves. We can easily concentrate on supposed failures to the extent that we completely miss positive changes. Often, my meditation students report that other people notice that they are changing; becoming more relaxed, less reactive, and more friendly.

Starting to develop more concentration. You can use the counting to give you a sense of whether you are developing more concentration. Being able to count to ten even once may be a step forward. If you make it to there, then you might want to aim to count to ten three times in a row. You might notice that you have the ability to count continuously and also have a lot of thoughts arising. That's great! Pay more attention to the fact that you have developed more continuity of awareness than you do to the fact that there are still a lot of stray thoughts.

Having interesting experiences in meditation. You may begin to notice unusual things - like a delightful sense of rhythm in your breathing, or the way in which your body subtly moves in response to your heartbeat. These are signs that you are developing more concentration and awareness in meditation, and you would be wise to pay attention to such experiences. Some of the things you might experience might seem a little odd. A common example is seeing patterns of moving lights. This is a good sign, in that you are moving into a deeper state of concentration. But it's best not to pay much attention to those lights or they will turn into a distraction and slow your progress.

Spontaneous resolution of posture problems. Sometimes you'll notice parts of your body relaxing spontaneously. Sometimes a particular problem you had with your posture might suddenly disappear.

Paying more attention to the outside world. It's a very good sign when you start to slow down and notice the beauty in the world.

Noticing your posture more. You may become more aware of your body during the course of the day, and you may notice how awareness of your body grounds you. You may even come to a deeper understanding of how your posture influences your emotions and mind.

Noticing you have choices. You may start to notice the gap between stimulus and response, and realize that you have a choice about how to respond. You can choose not to respond habitually, but instead to choose a more appropriate and creative response.

Becoming more aware of your actions. Often, before we get to the stage of being aware of our actions before we do them, we start to notice them after we've done them. It's tempting to feel frustration to realize that you've lost your temper once again, but actually it's a good sign that you're noticing this at all. With practice you'll be able to catch those responses earlier and earlier, until you're able to choose to respond more creatively.

Feelings of calmness. You may have spells of greater than usual calmness in your meditation or after meditation. You may even experience some reluctance to end a period of meditation.

Interesting and vivid dreams. When your meditation begins to "bite", it often leads to more vivid and meaningful dreams. Pay attention to these and see what you can learn from them.

Time passing quickly. When you're really enjoying something, time passes more quickly. It's common to notice that time passes faster in certain meditations.

Using Anchors in Stage Three

If the first two stages have gone really well, letting go of the numbers can allow us to develop a deeper and more balanced concentration. However, if we haven't managed to develop enough calmness in the first two stages, then it's easy to get lost in the third stage.

This often happens because the counting has been acting as an anchor for our awareness: it stops us from drifting too far away from the breath. So if we let go of the counting we can often float off into distraction.

One way to retain an anchor while letting go of the numbers is to use a physical anchor. I sometimes use the physical sensations in my hands in the same way as I

use the numbers. At the end of every outbreath I take my awareness to my hands. It helps to keep me grounded.

The physical anchor is a more refined anchor than the counting because it's non-verbal -- it cuts down on the amount of thinking, so that your mind can develop a deeper level of stillness.

What's a good meditation?

There are two answers to that question. Both are valid, but one answer is more useful than the other. The first answer would be that a good meditation is one where you feel concentrated, where you're enjoying yourself, and where there aren't many distractions. This is probably the most common answer that people would give, and it's the least useful.

The second answer would be that a good meditation is one where you have taken every opportunity to return your attention to the breath -- no matter how distracted you have been. So you might have been very distracted, but every time you realised that you had been distracted you'd taken your awareness back to the breath. This is a much more useful way to think of what a good meditation consists of.

The reason that the second way of looking at this question is more useful, is that "good" meditations of the first type will come and go, whereas you can always have "good" meditations of the second type. Also, this is a more realistic way of looking at things. In meditation you're working to alter your mental and emotional habits. You're subtly changing your personality. In a "good" meditation of the first type you might be having an easy time of it -- your practice is very enjoyable -- but you might not be actively engaging with yourself. You might actually be rather passive. But a meditation where you have really worked -- even although you've experienced a lot of distractions and not had an easy time of it -- that is a good meditation.

Thought Trains

We talk about "trains of thought." You can think of these as being like real locomotive trains that pull into a busy station and then go rattling off. Most of them don't go anywhere that we particularly want to go (most of them are to do with worrying, getting angry, running ourselves down, etc). But our mind is like a little kid that's very restless and curious, and keeps going through the open doors into the carriages. Before we know it we're miles away from where we wanted to be (in dangerous territory, often!), and it takes us forever to get home.

You can learn just to watch the trains pulling up and pulling away, being aware of them and choosing not to get into them.

Are there any trains we want to get into? Yes. Some thoughts can be useful, if they are reflections about our meditation, for example. Such thoughts take us deeper into our meditation. One difference between these thought trains and those that take us into distractions, is that when we're reflecting (as opposed to being distracted), we know what we're thinking and why, and what effect those thoughts are having). By contrast distracted thoughts are like dreams -- we don't know we're in them until we "wake up."

Standing back from the practice

Diane, one of my students, reported the following: "This morning it was not as easy to concentrate; I had to make more of an effort to keep myself on track. I handled the situation quite easily, noticing that I was more distracted and being aware that it would take a bit more work today to keep myself out of distraction. I did not judge myself or get scared that my practice is falling apart, just acknowledged that it was not one of my better days and went on from there."

Your meditation practice will always have its ups and downs. This is inevitable in developing any skill. You'll have good days and bad days, and at first both good and bad experiences may seem to arrive randomly, as gifts - welcome or unwelcome - of the gods. At first this can be dispiriting. You think you're doing so well; your meditation was so calm and enjoyable yesterday, and here you are today struggling to count to three and feeling that it's all hopeless.

Diane's approach to her ups and downs is exemplary. Instead of getting lost in the distracted, reactive states of self-pity or fear, she simply observed what was happening, realizing that the conditions in her mind, for whatever reason, had changed, and that the kind of effort she would have to make had also changed. Change is unavoidable. Life gives us that challenge. And it isn't helpful to us to mourn the inevitable or to fight change. We have to learn to embrace change, accept that it a part of our lives, and then respond as creatively as we can - no condemnation, no self-recriminations; just a patient sense of working with whatever comes up. As Diane went on to say: "I guess I get the good and the bad, perhaps just more awareness of my state of mind whatever it may be. I remind myself to be especially gentle with myself, that the 'bad' is really no different than the 'good', it just is." Meditation is, above all, the art of dealing with what is.

Guiding, not controlling

The great hypnotherapist, Milton Erickson, told a story about how one day, when he was a boy, a riderless horse wandered into the farmyard outside his home. Milton had never seen this horse before, and had no idea where it lived, but very soon he had the horse back where it belonged. How did he do this?

Well, he sat on the horse's back, got it to start walking, and then every time they came to a turn in the road, he paid attention to the almost imperceptible movements of the horse's body that told him where it wanted to go. And once young Milton had sensed in which direction the horse wanted to head in, he encouraged it to do so. It turned out that the horse knew its own way home, and all Milton had to do was give it a little gentle guidance.

It's similar with our breathing. I've said that in the mindfulness of breathing practice we're not controlling our breath. On the other hand I've also suggested that you can use deep breathing, or breathing into the belly, or breathing into the upper chest, etc., as ways of altering your state of mind. This might sound contradictory, but it's not really. When we change the pattern of our breathing, we don't have to exert any control. We can gently guide the breath without controlling it, as Milton did.

Had Milton tried to tell the horse where to go, he'd never have got it home. Horses, after all are trained to follow orders. Instead he used a more subtle technique of being aware of where the horse wanted to go, and then reinforced that desire with some gentle guidance. The horse soon got the idea.

We all are riders of horses, in a way. Our breathing is generally under the control of subconscious processes, and it has to be said that our subconscious, by and large, does a pretty good job of keeping breathing. The subconscious rarely fails to carry out its tasks, which is more than can be said for our conscious minds (how often do we go upstairs to get something and then forget by the time we get there what it was we wanted?). So let your subconscious do what it's good at.

When you want to change your breathing, say by breathing into your belly more deeply, then all you really have to do is to take your awareness into your belly to give your subconscious a gentle hint, and then let it do the work. In this way, we gently guide our breath rather than control it.

Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation: Stage Four

Stage Zero

Prepare for the meditation by setting up your posture, by becoming more aware of the physical sensations of the body, and by relaxing as best you can.

Stages One, Two, and Three

Follow the stages in order, first of all counting after the breath, then before the breath, and then letting go of the counting.

Stage 4

In the fourth and final stage of this practice, begin to narrow the focus of your awareness, so that you're focusing more and more on the sensations where the breath first passes over the rims of the nostrils. You may even notice the sensations where the breath passes over the upper lip. If any of these sensations are hard to find, just notice the breath at the first place you can feel it as it enters and leaves the body.

You may even notice the sensations where the breath passes over the upper lip. But if any of these sensations are hard to find, just notice the breath at the first place you can feel it as it enters and leaves the body.

Review of the practice

In the first stage we worked on calming the mind through focusing on the out-breath. The second stage helps bring more energy and awareness into our relaxed mind. The third stage blends these two qualities, to help us develop a calm, energetic awareness. When our mind is like this (and you may not have got there yet but it will come with practice) it is very "pliable." In other words our mind has become a very powerful tool.

What we do with this tool in the fourth stage is to develop one-pointed awareness. This isn't a forced concentration, but rather a natural absorption that is based on interest and even fascination.

Why is concentration so important? Well, that's another story. But you can find out more by following another link.

A nasal experiment (best performed while alone)

This might sound weird, but have you ever checked to see just how sensitive the rims of your nostrils are? Well, I didn't expect you were going to admit it!

Try touching the inner rims of your nostrils as gently as you can (check no-one is watching first!). Use the very tip of your finger, and try to find the lightest touch that you can still feel. You should find that you're able to feel your fingertip almost before it makes physical contact. The rims of your nostrils are covered with tiny little hairs, just a fraction of a millimeter long. Each hair has a very sensitive nerve at the root, and every time your breath passes through your nostrils, these nerves are triggered. Of course we don't usually notice those sensations, but it's an excellent exercise to try to be aware of the breath passing over your nostrils. Having to pay attention to such a refined sensation encourages your mind to move onto a more subtle level of perception. And since it's not possible to remain aware of such a subtle sensation unless your mind is very still, the fourth stage encourages deeper levels of mental and emotional stillness.

Ending your meditation practice: Stage "Omega"

We've talked about "Stage Zero" as being the important preliminary stage where we set up good conditions for meditating by working with our posture and our inner attitudes. I've compared it to the stage of mixing the ingredients for a cake, as well as making sure that the oven is at the right temperature. In other words we're making sure that the conditions are congruent with the outcomes we want to achieve.

But in baking a cake there are also some things you want to do at the end of the baking process to make sure that the cake comes out right. You want to make sure, for example, that you have oven gloves on so that you don't burn your hands and drop the cake on the floor. You need to check that the cake is in fact properly baked and that it doesn't need a few more minutes in the oven. You need to place the cake on a rack so that it doesn't go soggy.

Similar considerations apply in our meditation practice. It's possible to ruin a perfectly good meditation by hurrying out of the practice. So here are a few tips so help ensure that your meditation ends well. I call this process of ending the meditation "Stage Omega", because it's the final stage of the meditation, but isn't usually enumerated.

Give yourself time to absorb the effects of the practice.

If you don't pay attention to the effects that the meditation practice has had on your mind and emotions, then you might not realize that any changes have taken place. This can be rather dispiriting, to say the least. Often we develop much more of a sense of calmness than we are consciously aware of, and if we don't give ourselves time to appreciate this we might immediately undo the positive states that we've created by smothering it with despondent or frustrated thoughts and feelings.

Take your meditation into the world

In a way, Stage Omega is not really the end of your meditation, it's just a transition from meditating with our eyes closed, sitting on a cushion, to meditating with our eyes open in the midst of everyday activity. Our meditation practice should have a beneficial effect on the way we live, and it's more likely to do that if we make the transition from sitting meditation to everyday activity as smooth and elegant as possible.

I suggest that you go recall how I end the guided meditations.. Notice how I suggest that you gradually broaden your awareness. At the end of the fourth stage you're focusing on the subtle sensations at the rims of your nostrils. You can broaden your awareness from that narrow focus to become aware of the whole breathing process. Then you can become aware of the whole of your body, and then you can include other dimensions of awareness such as feeling, emotion, and your mind. And lastly, you can broaden your awareness right out into the world around you, becoming aware of your external sensations of space, sound, touch, and light.

Actually, it's very beneficial to go further than that so that you try to maintain your mindfulness as you get off your cushion, bow to your shrine (if that's the sort of thing you do), blow out the candles, straighten up your meditation equipment, and leave the room. And even then you should try to maintain your awareness as you go onto the next activity.

When I'm leading group meditations, I can often tell how someone has been working in their meditation by the way they get up and move around. If they make a lot of noise and the drop their cushions with a loud "whump" at the back of the meditation room then it's a fair bet that they either haven't been making much effort or that their effort has been pretty crude. If their movements are elegant and they lay their cushions down carefully and quietly, then I have a good idea that they have been working internally with the same kind of grace, balance, and care.

Take your time moving onto the next activity

One very good reason for taking your time coming out of the practice and moving onto your next activity is that it's possible to become emotionally "jarred" by rushing into the first item on your "to do" list. It's often the case, as I've mentioned above, that you can develop more calmness than you at first realize. Another quality that you can develop is a greater degree of emotional sensitivity, and if you do not respect this then the first encounter that you have (which is likely to be with someone who has

not been meditating and who is in a very different mental state from you) may be very unpleasant. Somehow this is less of a problem when you take just a few minutes to allow the effects of the meditation to sink in. I don't know what happens in this process of assimilation, but I suspect that in some way your subconscious mind makes some subtle internal readjustments which allow you to deal more effectively with encounters with others.

If you do give yourself a few minutes at the end of your practice to assimilate your experience, and take your time elegantly making a smooth transition from the cushion to the world, then you will often have the experience of finding that you can meet others who may even be in a very antagonistic state of mind, and be able to calmly absorb the other person's emotions without even a ripple appearing on the surface of your mind. As the Buddha said,

"If your calmness is like a great lake, then an elephant can jump in and the waters simply close over it. But if your calmness is like a small pool, then when an elephant jumps in there will be such a splash that there will be no water left!"

Four dimensions of mindfulness

In Buddhism, there are several terms that are translated as mindfulness or are closely related to the concept of mindfulness, and each of them has a different flavor. It's useful to get to know the different dimensions of mindfulness.

Sati

Sati most simply means "recollection", both in the sense of memory and in the sense of "having gathered together once more". Sati is the aspect of mindfulness that knows what is going on at any particular time. For example, when we're aware of our posture, and that we're in a certain mood, and that our mind is alert or dull, then this is sati.

Sati is knowing what is going on, and we need to know this in order to be able to make any meaningful changes. If you don't know where you are, how can you get to where you want to go?

Sampajañña

Sampajañña is the aspect of mindfulness that extends over a period of time. It includes an awareness of purpose (where we want to go), and an awareness of where we've already been. Often in Buddhist texts, the terms sati and sampajañña are joined together into one compound term, sati-sampajañña, and it's this compound term that's often translated as "mindfulness". Sampajañña is necessary so that we can periodically compare where we are going with where we want to be. Sampajañña is like the compass that gives us our bearings.

Dhamma-vicaya

Dhamma-vicaya is the aspect of mindfulness that categorizes our experience in terms of some model or another. In the second Wildmind book we'll be learning about ways to categorize our distractions (the hindrances) as well as positive qualities that we can develop in meditation (the dhyana factors). Dhamma-vicaya is the act of comparing our inner experience to a mental map, so that we can navigate more effectively towards our goal.

The simplest kind of map you can have is something like a division of your emotional states into "positive" (those states that are constructive and helpful, like love, empathy, confidence) and "negative" (those that tend to be destructive, like hatred, addictive craving, cynicism).

Appamada

Appamada is mindfulness in the sense of watchfulness or vigilance. It's mindfulness imbued with a sense of the importance of the task in hand. Some texts say that if you lose your mindfulness you should grab it up again like a soldier in the heat of battle who has dropped his sword. Another interesting analogy is that we should act as swiftly as someone who has discovered that his or her hat is on fire. Appamada is the dynamic aspect of mindfulness.

All of these aspects of mindfulness work together synergistically. To some extent we may have to develop them separately, but in order to develop one fully we have to develop the others.

Reflections in mindfulness

This section is not about reflections *on* mindfulness, but is about the practice of reflecting while in a state of mindfulness. The whole point of the mindfulness of breathing practice is to help us to develop more concentration and calmness, so that we can break through into a deeper understanding of the nature of reality. Having stilled our mind, so that it has become like a calm lake, we can then begin to reflect. It's a happy coincidence (or is it a coincidence?) that a lake, like our minds, can only reflect when it is calm.

But what is reflection? We tend to assume that reflection is having a constant flow of thoughts running through our minds, but this does not have to be the case. In fact it's best if it isn't. Imagine that you are standing in front of a calm lake. The lake is still and tranquil, and you can see the reflections of the further shore. You take a tiny pebble, and toss it into the midst of the reflections (toss it in with respect, as if it were an offering to the ancient gods that live in the depths of the waters). The stone plops into the water, and disappears without trace, leaving behind waves of concentric ripples. Each ripple presents you with a slightly different perspective on the reflections of the other shore. You watch the ripples radiating from the place where the stone vanished, as they widen and fade and eventually disappear altogether. Then once the lake's surface is still once more, the reflections have returned to normal, and you toss in another offering.

This is how we can best reflect in meditation; reverently dropping a thought into our hearts, and then patiently watching the ripples coming from that thought until our mind has once more become still. The ripples that emanate from the thought-pebble are not necessarily thoughts - they're more of an indescribable feeling of subtly shifting perspectives (like the distorted images at the edge of each ripple). You drop in the pebble of thought, and your emotions and your subconscious understandings respond with a subtle shiver.

What kinds of pebbles can we drop into the waters? We can drop in the thought that each breath is precious - that it only lasts for a moment never to return. This challenges our assumptions that we do the same thing over and over. We never do the same thing over and over. Every experience is unique, and it is deeply fulfilling to experience the uniqueness of each precious moment.

We can reflect on the fact that our breath connects us with every human being, plant, and animal in the world. Our breath is the living symbol of our interconnectedness with others. Your body, and the breath that sustains it, is made of forests, and fields, and birds, and animals, and oceans, and mountains. It is made of the air above, and the earth below. It is made from the remains of a long-ago dead star. We are vaster and richer than we think.

We can reflect on the impermanent and insubstantial nature of every experience we have. Thoughts come and go like rainbow apparitions, emotions coalesce like clouds

and then dissipate. Feelings loom like shadows and then are gone. Where did they come from. Where did they go?

The proper contemplation of these sorts of reflections can lead at times to a certain unease, although that unease should be seen as a creative force - a questioning of assumptions that are so close to us that we rarely, if ever, see them. But they can also lead to a sense of fulfillment, and a sense of awe and wonder at the majesty and mystery of life.

As a great Indian teacher said: "Let these three expressions: I do not have. I do not understand. I do not know, be repeated over and over again. That is the heart of my advice." This might seem strange advice at first, but that only means that the path of reflection is deep and subtle, and that we all have a long way to go in cultivating that sense of awe and mystery which turns not-knowing into the most profound source of wisdom.

Keeping subtlety in the practice

Because the sensations at the rims of the nostrils are so subtle, there can be a tendency to breathe more forcefully in order to heighten the sensations. Try to resist this tendency, and instead allow your breath to be very light and delicate. Ideally you shouldn't be able to hear your breathing.

(Sometimes you'll find that you think you're hearing the breath, but that it's actually a purely internal sound - one that only exists in your head. This is fine, and you shouldn't try to get rid of that kind of sound. Instead you should be aware of it as well as the physical sensations of your breathing).

Instead of breathing more heavily, try to find the subtle sensations by allowing your mind itself to become more receptive and subtle - this is the point of this fourth stage of the practice. Making your breath coarser by snorting (yes, it can get that bad!) can make it easier to feel the breath, but rather undermines the development of a more refined perception of the breath. If you don't manage at first to find the sensations on the rims of the nostrils, then you can be aware of the breath in your nostrils; cool on the in breath and warm on the out breath.

And sometimes people find it easier to notice the sensation on the upper lip, and that's okay as well. Over time, try to refine your awareness so that you become aware of the most delicate sensations that you can detect - these are the true focus of this stage.

If you can find the sensations of the air flowing over the rims of your nostrils, then congratulations; now it's time for you to refine the practice even more. For example, you can notice whether the sensations are more pronounced in the left or right nostril, and you can try to take more awareness into any "dead spots" where the sensations are lacking. Or you can become more aware of the sensations just at the fronts of the rims of your nostrils, rather than all around; just to stretch your ability to detect very subtle sensations indeed.

There are always greater degrees of refinement to which we can take our concentration.

Where are you going?

I'd like you to set aside the next few minutes for an exercise. If you're tired or unable for whatever reason to give this exercise your full attention, then I suggest you put this exercise aside for now or read another part of the site so that you can come back and spend some quality time with yourself.

As you're reading these words, feeling the weight of your body being supported, and as you notice your breath flowing in and flowing out, feel your body begin to relax and notice your mind becoming calmer. And imagine that it's now some years in the future; perhaps ten years, perhaps fifteen years - it doesn't really matter. And you're walking up to the front door of your house, and as you open the door you notice that

it's very still and quiet and dark inside. Then you hear some surreptitious sounds, and just when you're wondering if you should be worried, you realize to your surprise and delight that your house is full of people you know.

There are family members - perhaps some that you haven't seen for years. There are friends. There are colleagues. There are people from the spiritual community or community groups of which you are a member. And all of these people are here to celebrate you and your life.

One by one, these people stand up and rejoice in your merits. They rejoice in your achievements, in your accomplishments, in the personal qualities that you embody. They share what contributions you have made to their lives.

Now, I'd like you to spend a few minutes listening to what these people say, and then to write down some of the points that seem most significant to you.

If you'd really done this exercise, then what you have just achieved is to step beyond your normal sense of yourself and to get in touch with your deeper values and beliefs. You've developed a clearer understanding of what is truly most valuable to you. You've gotten closer to the aspects of yourself that exist in potential in the depths of your being. You've developed a deeper understanding of who you are and who you are to become - or, rather, of who you can become, since the unfolding of that potential will not take place spontaneously, but will be the result of your own conscious efforts.

You have given yourself the beginnings of a map to navigate by, perhaps for the rest of your life. You have developed a stronger sense of your ideals - not what you think you ought to be doing but a true sense of what your deepest values are. For those people who were extolling your virtues were, of course, not other people at all. The voices were the voices of your own depths - of your own Wildmind.

I've talked elsewhere about the aspect of mindfulness that is called *sampajañña* - our inner compass that tells us where we have been and where we are going. Now a compass is most useful when we have a map to help us navigate, and so the reason that we have just done this exercise is to help us have a deeper mindfulness of who we are and of who we are becoming. We're providing a sense of direction so that we can use our *sampajañña* in order to navigate towards our ideals.

Every decision we make in life - from how we are going to prioritize tasks at work to how we are going to deal with a difficult child - is an opportunity to make choices in the light of where we ultimately wish to end up. We have an opportunity in every such decision to move towards or away from our ideals. The more that we are in touch with those ideals, the wiser our decisions will be.

I suggest that you write down those ideals in some form and put them somewhere that you can easily and frequently review them. I have a copy of my own "personal mission statement" (as I call my ideals) in my planner, and I consult them at least weekly. Other people put theirs on the bathroom mirror so that they can remind themselves of what is important even more frequently.

Referring to your ideals frequently is an excellent way of clarifying your goals, and is an important step towards committing to bringing those goals into the present. Over time you will learn to see yourself not just as what you currently are, but in terms of what you are becoming. This, I have found, is one of the most empowering experiences we can have. What we currently are may not amount to much, but what we are becoming can be truly wonderful and a source of constant inspiration.

Dealing with ups and downs

Diane, one of my students, reported the following:

"This morning it was not as easy to concentrate; I had to make more of an effort to keep myself on track. I handled the situation quite easily, noticing that I was more distracted and being aware that it would take a bit more work today to keep myself

out of distraction. I did not judge myself or get scared that my practice is falling apart, just acknowledged that it was not one of my better days and went on from there."

Your meditation practice will always have its ups and downs. This is inevitable in developing any skill. You'll have good days and bad days, and at first both good and bad experiences may seem to arrive randomly, as gifts - welcome or unwelcome - of the gods. At first this can be dispiriting. You think you're doing so well; your meditation was so calm and enjoyable yesterday, and here you are today struggling to count to three and feeling that it's all hopeless.

Diane's approach to her ups and downs is exemplary. Instead of getting lost in the distracted, reactive states of self-pity or fear, she simply observed what was happening, realizing that the conditions in her mind, for whatever reason, had changed, and that the kind of effort she would have to make had also changed. Change is unavoidable. Life gives us that challenge. And it isn't helpful to us to mourn the inevitable or to fight change. We have to learn to embrace change, accept that it a part of our lives, and then respond as creatively as we can - no condemnation, no self-recriminations; just a patient sense of working with whatever comes up. As Diane went on to say: "I guess I always got the good and the bad, and perhaps now just have more awareness of my state of mind whatever it may be. I remind myself to be especially gentle with myself, that the 'bad' is really no different than the 'good', it just is."

This is an excellent observation. Meditation is, above all, the art of dealing with what is.

Moving from stage three to stage four

In the third stage we're usually aware of quite a large area of the sensation associated with the breath. We may have been focusing primarily on the belly, or the chest, or the sensations in the head and throat. You may even have been aware of all of this sensation.

In the fourth stage however we're following a very small area of sensation -- just the sensations on the rims of the nostrils.

I like to make a smooth transition from one stage to the other, in order to maintain more of a sense of continuity, and to bring more elegance into my mind.

I do this by narrowing my focus with every breath. Over a series of perhaps seven or eight breaths, I'll start to narrow down my focus, "homing" in on the sensations on the rims of the nostrils.

In the first breath I might be focused on the whole breath, right down to the belly, on the next perhaps on the whole of the chest, throat, and head. Then just the upper chest, throat, and head. Then the throat and head. Then the head. Then just in the nostrils, and then the tips of the nostrils.

Gradually homing in in this way brings more elegance and smoothness and so helps the stages flow together better.

Why all the emphasis on concentration in meditation?

Concentration enriches life, while distraction dilutes life.

Have you ever had the experience of talking with a friend while you're distracted, and then you realize you haven't been listening to them because you've drifted off on some train of thought? I guess we all have.

How can we develop deep and meaningful relationships with others if we can't stay focused? How can we deepen our understanding of ourselves if we don't experience anything but our surface distraction?

Concentration allows us to go more deeply into our experiences. It allows us to experience more intensely, so that we are with other people more intensely, with ourselves more intensely.

Concentration allows us to really enjoy what we're doing: whether it's being in the country, or reading a book, writing, or talking, or thinking.

Concentration allows us to think more clearly and deeply. When we can stay with a train of thought without wandering off, we can ask more penetrating questions of ourselves and, crucially, be able to hear the deep, considered, and wise answers that come from our depths.

What's next?

We've already suggested that you need to keep on practicing the Mindfulness of Breathing, and that it's a good idea to alternate it with Metta Bhavana Practice. To begin learning this practice, you can go back to our Start Meditating page.

From the Start Meditating page you can also begin to explore how to work with specific distractions in meditation, and how to develop more calm, contentment, and concentration in your practice.

More information on stage four

Congratulations! You've now learned the full four-stage practice of the Mindfulness of Breathing.

Spend some time practicing all four stages, and reviewing what you already know in order to deepen your experience of the practice.

Then you'll be ready to begin learning another practice, or to further develop your meditation skills.

We recommend alternating the Mindfulness of Breathing practice and the Metta Bhavana practice. Each practice feeds into and deepens the other. You can do them on alternate days, or even do one in the morning and one in the evening.