

ARTICLES FROM THE OLD SITE

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Basic Meditation Instructions

The Moving and the Still

We begin by making a distinction between the moving and the still. Seated, with eyes closed, I ask you to show a preference for the still while allowing the moving (thoughts, feelings, breathing) to continue uninterrupted. What you will readily know as the still will initially be external physical contact, which will be felt at certain contact points. You can start with either one of these:

- The touch of your hands on your lap or your knees, or
- The points of contact of your legs, feet, and rear against the cushion or the floor.

Showing preference is simply the intention to prefer the stillness of the contact points while allowing your thoughts and feelings to come, to stay, and to leave on their own. It is essentially showing preference for being with the experience of your body sitting still, even though your mind may only be drawn into that stillness for a few seconds at a time. Even as you show preference for the stillness of your body sitting, your thoughts and feelings may continue to occupy much of your attention, and that is just what you are experiencing and need not be changed.

Following these instructions, you may experience lengthy periods of your mind being very active, making it difficult for you stay with the contact points for even a few seconds. You may wonder if sitting with all this mental chatter is really meditating; I assure you, it is. We cannot force our minds to be still, for that will just create more agitation, tension, aggression, and self-dislike. In this path of gaining greater peace and tranquility, we use peaceful means from the very beginning.

Along with the instruction to show preference for the stillness of the body as you sit, I usually suggest that people become conscious of their expectations and ideas about meditation, and be willing to learn what it is like to sit without any goal, objective, or purpose in mind. Just allow the meditation process itself to unfold without trying to control or judge it, though attempts to control and judgments about what is happening will occur. There is no way to do this practice wrong, except by constantly trying to control your meditation experience instead of letting it be just what it is. Through this approach you will learn a natural way of being in your experience but not entirely of it, and in time you will develop a wider range of inner experience, a capacity to tolerate whatever arises in your

mind, and a more extensive awareness of the conditioned nature of your world.

Recollecting the Meditation Sitting Afterward

In the past I would recommend recollecting meditation experiences during the meditation sitting. I have seen that this is not such a good way to begin, as it can create a certain amount of pressure and tension to interrupt what is going on in a sitting in order to recall what just happened. Instead, I suggest that you just allow your meditation sittings to follow their own course as much as possible, without prescribed interference, and then recollect the meditation sitting afterwards.

After each meditation sitting, take a few moments to silently recollect what went on during the meditation sitting. Start by recalling what is easy to recall and then try to recall other parts of the sitting which are more difficult to bring back to mind. A good deal of each meditation sitting may be impossible to retrieve afterwards, so be satisfied with a simple recollection of what you truly remember. Also, in the recollection, accuracy is not as important as honesty. (By that I mean accurately recalling details is not as important as getting an "honest picture" of what went on.)

To aid in this process of recollection, you might want to take the time to write down what you remember of a meditation sitting in a journal.

Brief Meditation Instructions

(transcribed from a talk)

I just want to say a few things about meditation before we begin. Some of you have already been meditating or already have a practice and what I'd like for you to be able to do today is to let yourself be a little more allowing, a little bit more friendly to yourself in your practice and to start to notice some of the things that have gone into your meditation practice. Because when we learn a particular instruction, a particular way of meditating, we often keep doing it, we keep doing those instructions again and again, and we may not see all that clearly that we've actually developed a "meditator" in our practice. That there's actually some sense of a particular style of meditation, particular things that we expect or anticipate to happen in the sittings, even particular judgments or views on experience which go

completely unquestioned because they're so much a part of us. So, in order to look at those a bit and to get a sense of what those are, maybe free yourself from some of them that may be a bit rigid, is to meditate as you have been but don't feed that practice. Let it kind of go on its own and start to notice some of the things that are going on in it.

For example, if you've had a practice of being aware of your breath you might notice that there are times when you go to your breath because you're feeling a particular pain or emotional discomfort or certain memories come up and you go to it. Or, you're going to it because an idea comes into your head that you should be with your breath, and so you bring your attention to it. Start to notice a little bit more of what's gone into that practice. Not to drop it at that point, but just to see, "Well this is what's happened; this is how meditation has developed for me." And you don't need to do it in a way where you're always on top of your experience and trying to figure that out, but rather, just let your experience go on and every so often in the sitting you may notice things about your meditation practice. And just keep that in mind: that you're becoming aware of that, and not trying to control it or direct it, but just kind of let things be in the sitting.

For those of you who haven't meditated before, I'm just going to give you what I give as a basic instruction. And the way I look at instructions is that if an instruction gets in the way, just drop it. It's not working. If an instruction is helpful, then just continue with it. Just let yourself stay with it, and if your mind goes to doing something else, that's fine. Part of this is giving up control. So you don't need to be controlled or directed in this. Instead, the real task is to let yourself surrender to the process that you engage when you're in meditation.

So the basic instruction I give to people is to be aware of the contact or your hands touching your legs, or your feet touching the cushion, or your rear touching the cushion. Just the external contact or your body sitting. And the reason for that is that it's always there when you sit. Your attention can go to it without searching for it. When you put your attention on your foot touching the mat, it's still there. It doesn't change. It doesn't shift. And so it's really much easier as an object for your mind to concentrate on. When it comes to thoughts, feelings you have, don't try to suppress them or push them aside. Instead, just let them be there. Your attention will move. So sometimes your attention will be aware of sounds. You'll be aware of your body. You may be aware of your breath. Let yourself be flexible. And, let your attention be a little freer than you have in the past. So this is a different beginning, a different orientation than instructions which say "just be aware of your breath," or "just be aware of your body," or "just be aware

of a mantra." Instead, it's more about letting your attention go from thing to thing and noticing how you focus on certain things, how you do become aware of things. If you start to get drowsy and tired, let yourself feel that. Don't try to wake yourself up. You can let yourself slouch. You can let yourself go towards sleep. If you find yourself impatient or restless, don't try to calm yourself or stop it. Let yourself feel what it's like to be restless and a little bit agitated, whatever you may feel in the sitting. So you start to welcome these things into your meditation sitting instead of pushing them out of your sitting. And, in the long run that'll make it so that you'll be able to handle them and deal with them all through your meditation practice and not try to find ways to stop them or get rid of them.

So, unless there are any questions, we'll start a sitting, and we'll sit for 30 minutes.

Instructions from within Meditation and The Problem with Instructions from the Outside

The mind in meditation can operate under different laws than it does outside of meditation. There are many meditation instructions which actually originate outside of meditation and therefore cannot take into account how the mind functions within meditation. It is like someone learning English using the grammatical rules of Sanskrit or Chinese, trying to arrange words into meaningful sentences by using logical formulae that should make sense, but instead produce nonsensical statements. As such, these instructions appear to be logical and consistent with how we commonly view the mind, though they are full of contradictions when applied to meditation.

The only way to test what I have to say in this article is by experimentation, which is a perfectly valid way to get to the truth about anything.

We begin with the instruction, "be aware of the breath." Unfortunately, this instruction has to be elaborated on to be used, and much of that elaboration has come from outside of meditation. There are many instructions that sound right for observing the breath, and of those, the ones that involve some sort of technique (or concentration exercise) are the most hostile to the natural functioning of our minds in meditation.

Counting the breath, for instance, meets so much resistance from our naturally roaming mind that we generally end up berating our bad habits of

thinking too much when we repeatedly fail to go from one to five and back again without a break in our concentration. Noticing the smooth rise and fall of the abdomen as we breathe naturally, supposedly without forcing our attention or altering our breath, rarely results in the all-too-desired sharp awareness and tranquility it is supposed to offer, yielding up one surge after another of agitation, self-hatred, and frustration. What is prescribed in such a venerable way as a relaxant for the mind is none other than an outsider's brilliant idea of how the beginning meditator's mind should function if only it could be trained to conform to the instructions that are being applied.

Some of you may prefer this approach of getting your mind to do what it is "supposed to" as the focus of your meditation practice. This activity in itself can consume much of your energy in meditation, and while not leaving room for much else, it does create enough inner strife for you to work even harder for that precious inner peace that comes when all the thinking stops, the gross emotions dissipate, and the smooth flow of the breath is soothing and timeless. When the mind is finally subdued, then what? For many this becomes a memory they continue to strive to recapture over and over again through the same means of battling the mind.

A question I asked myself when I had had enough of trying to corral and subdue my mind in meditation was, "How can the mind become sharply aware and tranquil through peaceful means?" In asking this question, I then understood that I had not understood meditation, in the sense that I did not believe in the possibility that the roaming mind could lead me to the still and peaceful mind. I had taken on the belief that these were two separate and unrelated experiences of mind, one being far more preferable than the other.

Many years down the road of meditating through primarily peaceful means (those old habits of bullying come to the fore on occasion) have taught me a few things about instructions that arise during meditation. One thing is that meditation instructions that come from inside meditation are not logical and do not conform to common views of how the mind works. Another thing is that they are context-oriented and do not have universal applications.

What do I mean by instructions coming from inside of meditation? Simply that. That the meditation sittings become about being sensitive to your present state of mind, listening to it with a compassionate and understanding ear, following its course while allowing it to lead, and surrendering to whatever new experience it lands upon. Our minds are telling us many things when we meditate, and not all of it is useless chatter,

fantasies, daydreams, and desires. At times, while meditating, we are learning from our meditation experience how to meditate.

These inside instructions are not logical; they are intuitive, based on being honestly aware of what you are experiencing. They cannot be applied universally, as they only relate to particular experiences. Thus you cannot discover an instruction from within meditation and then turn it into a technique for everyone to use. It may work once or twice or even a few more times, but then you find yourself back again trying to follow one particular instruction, ignoring what your mind can tell you about itself in meditation.

So I will not give you any instructions, but I will briefly outline an approach to meditation. Just sit still, comfortably. There is the stillness of the body sitting and there is the moving of attention. Let your attention go where it will and notice when you try to avoid your thoughts, feelings, and urges, but do nothing about it. Just sit still and let your mind be as it is. Slowly and gently, over several sittings, cultivate a preference for the stillness of your body over the moving of your mind. A preference is not a wish, and it certainly is not aggressive and forceful; it is allowing your mind to be filled with thoughts, lazy or indifferent, restless, worried, and agitated, while preferring the awareness of your body sitting still. This is not about sticking with the body, or about following the breath, but about showing preference for the still and tranquil part of your experience while allowing all of the rest to continue uninterrupted. These are not really instructions: this is only a way to frame, to approach, the primary meditation experience, without adding anything new to it, except for the one gentle preference.

Three Conditions for an Independent Meditation Practice

Instead of instructions (or rules) to be followed, there are three conditions influencing what one does as meditation. These three conditions are obvious, commonplace, and concrete, so much so, I will use the words my students have repeatedly chosen for them: gentleness, permission, and interest.

What I suggest is that instead of trying to practice all of these three conditions at the same time, you choose one to influence your meditation sittings for the time being, and then wait and see how the other two come into play.

The one to begin with for those new to meditation is gentleness. For those with an established meditation practice, begin with permission (but still

read the section on gentleness). Those who tend to think a great deal during meditation (and outside of it) may want to begin with interest.

Before you begin meditating, in order for this to have a reasonable chance of working for you, you need to commit yourself to meditating in this way for at least one week (5 to 7 meditation sittings).

Gentleness

"Be gentle to yourself," I often say at the beginning of a workshop or retreat. Then I usually say something like, "In America, most of us are self-critical. We want to do things well. But we don't treat ourselves all that well in the process."

Gentleness in meditation is about how you treat yourself. Many meditators start their meditation sittings by diving right into doing the instructions they have been taught. They don't just bring their attention to the breath, a mantra, or visualization, but rather force it. Behind that force is aggression, pressure, driven-ness, or just plain tension. And when things don't go well, they tend to chastise themselves with thoughts of failure and self-doubt.

So, to start off a meditation sitting with gentleness is to not dive right into doing some kind of instruction or practice. Simply allow a transition to occur. What you were thinking about before the meditation sitting will naturally carry on into the beginning of the sitting. Many meditators start off a sitting by trying to stop all thoughts. Thoughts, when they arise, are then perceived as distractions. Here is where gentleness truly starts in meditation. These thoughts coming into your sitting are not distractions, for they are your thoughts, and most of the time outside of meditation, you are the one who owns them, acts on them, and produces more of them. They are to be welcomed into the meditation sitting just as you would welcome a friend, a relative, or even someone you may not particularly like into your home.

How to Begin a Meditation Sitting with Gentleness

A. Choose a comfortable posture to sit in, one that will not cause pain or create additional posture changes during the sitting. You may sit in a chair, have back support, or lie down on your back. Whatever posture you choose, make sure it is gentle to your body. If you have to move for some reason during the sitting, be aware of the pain, itch, or discomfort you are experiencing, and only then decide to move, moving slowly and

deliberately. When you move slowly and deliberately during a meditation sitting, there is less likelihood that the movement will feel disruptive.

B. Choose a length of time for the meditation sitting that is easy to begin with. One hour is generally too long, while five minutes is definitely too short. Most people find twenty or thirty minute long meditation sittings to be just right. Use a gentle sounding alarm or glance at a watch or clock on occasion. If you become restless, anxious, or extremely bored before the end of the sitting, allow yourself to end the sitting early. And if you would like to continue to sit behind the time you set for yourself, make sure you have given yourself enough time between the end of the sitting and whatever you may need to do after the sitting.

C. Sit with your eyes closed, as that will enable a meditative process to form more readily (as well as bring the other senses more into awareness). You may then bring your attention to the front of your face, your hands resting on your legs or one on top of the other, or your legs and feet touching the cushion you are sitting on. But do not hold your attention there, and definitely do not cut off thoughts, feelings, and sounds to return to the awareness of your body. Just have a gentle preference for your body sitting as you allow your thoughts and feelings to be.

D. Allow your mind to transition from what you were doing and thinking about before the sitting. This transition may contain recent memories, dialogues you just had, work you were doing, plans that you were making, lists of things to do, feelings of resentment, hurt, and rage, as well as feelings of hope, longing, and love, to name but a few of the themes you may encounter at any given time. You may fear that the transition will not be a transition at all, but will consume you for the entire sitting. If you are gentle with it, with all that is going inside of you as you sit down to meditate, it is bound to change for better. But if you are impatient with it (your thoughts and feelings) and try to stop it or do something to make it go away, you may just end up being hard on yourself, prolonging the difficulty. Being gentle with it, if it doesn't stop it, at least makes it less of a problem, less of a negative self-judgment.

Permission

You have permission to do the meditation practice of your choice, or, not do it.

Practically all people who are introduced to meditation are given an instruction to follow, and they follow it. Few rebel against the instruction

(or the teacher), believing that in order to get the right results from meditation they must follow a particular instruction. This creates an atmosphere of conformity when everybody is following the same instruction (or teacher), or an atmosphere of factionalism when students of different teachers meet in large groups.

Very few teachers truly accept all "wholesome" meditation practices as being of value. Even if they allow for people doing other practices than what they teach, these teachers will still hold their method as the right one, or the best one. It has taken me several years as a meditation teacher to work this problem through. I don't teach a smorgasbord of meditation techniques, which is how several meditation teachers have resolved this issue without dealing with it. What I do instead is teach a way to explore the various meditation practices one has done (or is doing).

To explore one's various meditation practices, one needs to do them. So students of mine have permission to do the practices they have done. Only this time they attempt to look at those practices and see some of the habits of mind they have developed by doing them. They also have permission not to do the practices they have done. They can do whatever is necessary for them. And they can rebel against my approach as much as they want.

Because what happens is that the students become independent. They are not dependent on me for the "right" instruction. Instead they form a relationship with me where we are both genuinely interested in what meditation is for them. I listen to people meditate their own way, not my way. I help them see what they are doing in meditation, and from that they see how skillful (or unskillful) they are at times.

The unfortunate, but necessary, consequences of independence are confusion, uncertainty, and doubt. When I hear a meditator speak of his confusion, I hear someone who is seriously applying himself to meditation and struggling to understand his experiences. When someone speaks of uncertainty, I hear surface certainties, convictions, and beliefs no longer having power over him. He is ready for true self-exploration. And when I hear someone doubt about ever becoming enlightened through meditation, I recognize someone who is beginning to see himself as he is and how far enlightenment appears to be when someone is honest about himself.

How to Begin Meditating with Permission

A. You have permission to meditate as you have been. If you choose not to meditate in your accustomed way at any point in the meditation sitting, you can use A through D of the previous section on gentleness.

B. Every so often in the meditation sitting (once every 5 to 10 minutes) reflect back on what you have been doing. For instance, if you have been counting your breath, recollect how you have been doing it, what the experience has been like, and what makes you remember (or decide) to count your breath. Sometimes on such reflection, you may not notice much of anything. When that happens, do not force it, and just continue with the practice you are doing.

C. After the sitting is over take a few moments to recollect the meditation sitting. In your recollection bring your attention to how you applied the instructions and what your "honest" experience of doing that practice was.

Interest

Interest, at the beginning, looks the least like itself than the other two conditions for exploration. At this stage it would be better to call it "focused thinking" as it may appear as ordinary problem-solving, ruminating, pondering, etc. It is important to let this kind of thinking go on, for besides there generally being quite a bit of momentum behind it, it is how our minds will eventually become "intelligently engaged" in looking at things.

This whole area of "focused thinking" in meditation is fraught with difficulties. Practices from the East generally advocate "transcending thinking" as opposed to thinking as being part of one's practice of inner understanding. Western traditions are generally more sympathetic to "focused thinking", and our verb "to meditate" does mean "to ponder, to contemplate, to reflect on."

Pondering, reflecting on, and contemplating are all forms of focused thinking, for they require some sort of concentration (sustained focus on something). When these are turned into meditation practices, they are usually given with "objects" to be pondered, contemplated, or reflected upon. What Eastern practices have to offer in this regard are ways to become aware of the act (or process) of focused thinking. But what is often missing from such practices is the allowing of focused thinking about things, from which the nature of focused thinking can be observed and studied.

Allowing one's mind to engage in focused thinking as part of the meditation sitting is thus a condition for any serious exploration of the process of

thinking, though at first it will appear more as a hindrance or impediment than as an asset. This occurs for a variety of reasons. The most common reason is that meditation is about "meditative states" and "focused thinking" is not generally considered to be "meditative". Such a view on thinking effectively fosters aversion to thinking, where there is no room for gentleness. Another reason is that the experience of sitting and thinking appears to be no different than idle day-dreaming. That is true. There may be little difference for some people between the experiences of "thinking in meditating" and day-dreaming. What distinguishes these two mental activities however is that meditation is done with the intention to develop more awareness of one's inner world while day-dreaming is done to pleasantly distract oneself. One last reason why most meditators see focused thinking as an impediment is that it generally carries with it a "self" which one is not entirely pleased with in meditation (but, for the most part, fine with outside of meditation). It is the "mundane self" behind the focused thoughts that one truly wants freedom from in meditation. Only, the route to such freedom is not to be found in the aversion to thinking, for like the many-headed Hydra, once one head is severed, two new ones grow (one is the newly reconstituted train of thought and the other is the judgments about the self that does the thinking).

How to Begin Meditating with Interest

- A. Sit, recline, or lie down in a comfortable posture. Close your eyes. Let yourself think. Don't try to think about anything; just let your mind think about what it will.
- B. During the entire sitting (15 to 30 minutes), try not to move your body or limbs. But if you have to move, do so slowly with forethought.
- C. If at any time in the sitting your thinking becomes fragmented, random, dreamy, or just less prominent, then allow those experiences to continue (instructions for the condition of gentleness can be used here). When focused thinking returns, for surely it will at some time, meditate with permission to do whatever you see as needed. If you need to go with the thinking, go with it; if you need to "let go" of the thinking, let it go on and subside of its own; if you need to explore it, let yourself think about the thinking that is going on of its own.
- D. At the end of the sitting, take a few minutes to recollect what you were thinking about during the sitting. Try to get a sense of the general themes of your thoughts (work, relationships, plans, memories, etc.) and how these themes shifted in the sitting (from work to relationships to memories, for

example). You need not write them down, unless that helps you with your recollection. And, you need not go into any detail with your recollection; it is enough, at the beginning, to just become aware of the general pattern of your "focused thinking" in the sitting.

About Learning and Unlearning Meditation

When we learn a meditation practice, we are often given a particular meditation instruction. We essentially learn how to do the instruction correctly to get the intended results or arrive at the specified goal. This kind of learning often entails a strict adherence to the meditation practice we are being taught, and requires us to adopt the beliefs and views of our teacher. It therefore generally turns into a type of learning process that encourages conformity, compliance, and dependence. And, on account of that, it may not be the kind of learning environment we had in our minds when we first heard of it, though it may have given us the certainty, safety, and clarity we needed just then.

This way of learning meditation may be unavoidable. I have made every effort to develop a way of teaching meditation where the detrimental aspects of such a process of learning are reduced to a minimum. Still, whenever meditation instructions are given and followed, whenever a teacher is the highest authority on a student's meditation practice, and whenever a set of concepts are taught which are held sacred and beyond question, the type of learning process described above will dominate and inform our meditation practice. The only way I see through this is to learn meditation with the knowledge that as we continue to meditate, we will need to look at the meditation practice we have done and begin to disentangle ourselves from the "side-effects" or "artifacts" created by our experience of learning it.

Unlearning meditation is the way in which we take a close, honest look at our meditation practice. In practice, it does not look radically different than learning meditation, and may even use some of the same approach to meditation, though for a slightly different purpose and from a different vantage point. Whereas, for example, we may use conditions instead of instructions (see article) in our meditation practice at the outset, from the vantage point of someone in an unlearning process, these will truly be conditions and not instructions. For a beginning meditation student, they will most likely be turned into instructions.

Unlearning Meditation

What I'm going to do is present my book *Unlearning Meditation*. First of all, before we go into the book, I just want to say a few things about it to give you some history on it and just a sense of what it is I'm doing. I wrote this book in 1999, and what I did during that time was I had people meditate for several days and do journal entries of their meditation sittings and then send me their journals. What I found in doing that was that many of the traditional ideas of what happens in meditation, or the models of meditation that people are taught, really did not fit what people were experiencing; that there was a discrepancy between what people were going through and what many of the books on meditation talk about as ways to meditate or meditative experiences even. So what I did was modify my own way of looking at meditation from what I had read from people. And I had been doing this all along, but seeing the journals made me think more deeply that we need a way of looking at meditation that's based on what people experience. And this is a different orientation.

What I found is that many of the people were meditating and looking at their own experience; what they ended up doing was quite naturally follow a process of unlearning rather than a process of learning new techniques or learning new meditation practices. The way that they would develop in meditation would be to break down the various obstacles and views that came along with the earlier meditation practice. And so their development would be truly a sense of letting go of what they originally learned. And that's what unlearning is about. It's another kind of learning. It's really for those who have been introduced to something and have made it so habitual, made it so much a part of themselves that they can't see it anymore. And when that happens, when a meditation practice or almost anything you do becomes so much a part of yourself, becomes such a strong habit, what you tend to do is just try to improve it along the same lines. You don't necessarily look at it. But once you start looking at it, you may start to see that there are other ways to go. That you're not limited just to that one way of meditating. And that's what I wanted to do here. And to really show that you can look at any way of meditating. It doesn't have to be my way of meditating. It can be any school of meditation. People can do this doing Zen or Tibetan practices or Hindu practices or Christian contemplative practices. They can look back at the practice and see what the practice is about.

What I decided to do instead of commenting on any other type of practice was to only comment on what it is I teach. Well my hope was that people reading this, if they're other practices would apply some of what I'm doing in this book to those practices - that they would see that this is a way of looking at what has developed in your practice of meditation. It's a way of reflecting on it.

And in saying that, there are still some things in this which are going to be about learning about what meditation is. Learning about the kinds of experiences you have, the way your mind works in meditation. And so that process is found in this unlearning.

Let's look at page 8, and I'll read this for you: "One's experience of meditation defines what meditation is. That is what I believe and teach. Most people do not trust their own experience and insights, deferring to the views of authorities (meditation masters) when faced with uncertainty as to whether they're meditating correctly or not. That is because meditation is primarily taught as a technique or exercise that must be done properly in order to get the desired results. The instructions are for the most part logical and direct in this respect: the perfectly executed instruction is synonymous with the desired goal. Thus, the person who practices being aware in the present moment comes to believe that the goal, when reached, is that of being aware and present all of the time. The person repeating a mantra in meditation comes to believe that the goal is a transcendent experience of Truth and the complete absorption on the mantra. On the other hand, a person who trusts in their own experience and insights, learning what the meditative process is by paying attention to her own meditation experiences, whatever they are, is not going to follow a logical path and may not even have a clue as to what the goal of meditation actually is. From my experience as a meditation teacher, that is an excellent place to begin."

The Pros and Cons of Moment-To-Moment Mindfulness Meditation

When someone becomes aware of the arising and passing away of each minuscule event at the six sense doors (eyes, ears, nose, palate/tongue, body/skin, and mind/thought) one is at that time practicing moment-to-moment awareness meditation. As one becomes aware of each successive moment, she is bound to become more conscious of her intentions, of each movement of her body, of what she should or should not be doing (saying

or thinking). She will be more attuned to sounds, smells, tastes, and sights than ever before. These are some of the major advantages one might realize early on from this practice.

On the down side, this sharp, pristine awareness of each thing that occurs can produce a surprising insensitivity to subtleties of thought and feeling. Since one's attention is not allowed to linger on anything even for a moment, subtle feelings and moods, especially those that persist at a low level, do not emerge into the field of awareness. A meditator may be quite aware of a sudden surge of anger, but be completely oblivious to a barely perceptible gnawing annoyance at something. In the area of thought, a meditator may observe that a thought arose and passed away, but be insensitive as to what the thought actually was and what feeling, if any, it may have contained.

In Vipassana, we are instructed to go from the gross to the subtle. A too heavy use of moment-to-moment awareness can keep the meditator at the level of gross impressions and feelings, not allowing her to get to the subtler aspects, where many deep understandings can occur.

I have listened to the experiences of several meditators who over the years have diligently practiced moment-to-moment awareness techniques. The most common technique, being that of noting, uses prescribed words, such as "thinking, thinking" to catch a consciousness event exactly while it occurs. Many people, including myself, who have used this technique to catch the immediate arising of sense and mental impressions have felt frustrated by our inability to do so. For us, the awareness of things has not been "moment-to-moment", but, instead, immediately after the fact. Nonetheless, we were aware; we just weren't fast enough.

In contrast to moment-to-moment awareness is a form of awareness that involves recollecting, or "calling back to mind" immediately prior experience. This form of awareness allows the mind to be and do as it pleases, giving it a long leash for its closely watched wanderings. One learns to tolerate its meanderings, while at the same time never losing the thin, tenuous sense of being present, alert, and aware. Here the meditator's effort is put into observing what she experiences, be it exalted states of mind or obsessions, and, upon her awareness returning to the still presence of the body, calling back to mind the prominent features of the periods of mind wandering. In this way, awareness is initially developed at the level in which it is truly present: weak and after the fact. In time, the meditator finds that there are periods where she is not so much recollecting but rather being mindful of thoughts, feelings, sensations, and sense impressions while they are occurring. Thus, gradually, moment to moment awareness arises,

sometimes remaining for whole sittings or even longer before it too vanishes, leaving the meditator once again aware of things at some undetermined time after the fact.

It is significant that the Pali word "sati" can be broadly translated in two different ways. One is as "wakefulness of mind, or mindfulness," while the other is "calling back to mind, recollection, memory" (especially that of sacred teachings), which is its original meaning. In the Pali Suttas of the Buddha and his disciples, you will find both of these meanings in use, which can make one wonder why only one definition (mindfulness) is used by mainstream Vipassana meditation. The answer to this question lies in the tradition of Theravada Buddhist teachers interpreting the early Suttas using concepts and definitions of the later scholastic periods of Buddhism, most particularly the concept of consciousness-moments.

The word "sati" has been attached to that concept, and has thus come to mean "the immediate direct awareness of each moment of consciousness as it arises and passes away." What this means to those who practice moment-to-moment mindfulness meditation is that they define awareness solely as being in the now and disregard knowledge about experience which is not in the now, but in the mind as a recollection.

No one can truthfully come to a conclusion about the practice of moment-to-moment mindfulness meditation, or awareness meditation that uses recollection, unless one has tried both of them. A meditation method needs to become mastered as a practice before its value can be appreciated or denied. Adopting it as a philosophy because it sounds good or because someone who is an authority says it is the best or only way to meditate is inadequate. The discerning meditator will diligently try out the approach and see where it leads.

Recollective Awareness

Coming up with the right kind of language to talk about this approach to meditation has been very difficult. What seems to have happened is that I've made a slight breakthrough in the last few months. It helped putting out Unlearning Meditation and making it more available to the public. But Unlearning Meditation, which is something that I've been giving talks on for a couple of years now, is really about how to break the habits of mind in meditation. But that's not what I teach necessarily. That's one aspect of it. But what I feel I'm teaching is something of a broader nature and a

particular way or style of meditating. And I've decided to call it "Recollective Awareness Meditation." And the reason for that is the kind of awareness that is involved comes about through recollection, through recalling things in your sittings, through an act of calling back to mind or looking back upon your experiences. And the recollection in itself is a form of awareness, is a form of becoming conscious of what happens when you meditate.

The initial instructions seem to be very loose and relaxed and you just let things happen, go with what you're experiencing. Showing preference for the body as a form of structure, as having a base. But you're not really trying to change or manipulate or direct or guide or do anything with your experience. You're letting the flow of the meditative process develop naturally. But if that was the only thing that you would be doing in meditation, you would find that you're really not getting that much more aware. You may be getting a little more tranquil. You may be getting in touch with deeper feelings, with certain states of mind you might not normally get in touch with. But it doesn't necessarily increase your awareness of the meditative experience. It doesn't produce the kind of awareness that Buddha recommends for one who wants to develop on the path to wisdom.

What I have seen is that people who've tried to use moment-to-moment awareness, which is how awareness is most commonly taught, tend to try to force themselves to be in the present moment and try to just maintain a certain stance on their experience where they are either noting it, giving it a label as "feeling feeling" or "thinking thinking" or "hearing hearing," or they're just trying to be in the "now" and that's the only part of the experience they tend to value. Whenever they're in the present moment or at a moment-to-moment awareness of experience, that's when they think they're meditating. Everything else, when the mind wanders, when something else happens, they think, "That's not meditation, that's 'mind wandering,' that's 'chattering,' that's getting away from the subject of meditation or the object of meditation."

Recollective awareness can occur very close to the event. I wouldn't suggest using noting, but I would say that noting can be a form of that. That is, you're recalling something that just happened. You're becoming conscious of something that just happened. With the practice of noting, if you try to keep on top of your experience in that way, there's not going to be any flow to it. Instead, it's going to be very choppy and you're always going to be noting what you're experiencing. That's what you'd be doing. You'd be developing a kind of commentator, a second voice that would become your

meditator. And that's what often happens with noting practices or trying to be in the present moment. They actually generate something else.

With recollective awareness you're not developing a commentator or another voice. You're letting your experience go on, and every so often in the sitting you may find that you become conscious of where you were. You're caught in a scenario about what you're going to say to somebody when you see that person tomorrow and you may be far along in the scenario and have said quite a bit when you finally realize, "Oh, I've been talking to this person in my mind for the last minute or two." And, at that point you would know what you were experiencing. It's a form of recollection. You might reflect back a little with a little bit of effort and recall what you were talking about, the themes, or if you saw the person's face that you were talking to, or you might recall something about the experience you just had and then drop it and then continue. And what that will do is it will not artificially disrupt the flow of your experience. Not like noting will, not like trying to be in the present moment will. Instead you find that you will naturally kind of come out of a scenario or something your mind is involved in and you look back, maybe for a few seconds, and then you may find that you go on.

And that's for thoughts and feelings and for what people consider to be mind wanderings. For other types of experiences, such as when you're aware of your breath, you're aware of just sounds or just your body, or you're sitting in a very calm state with not too many thoughts, you may find that there's no need to recall. You're in a way naturally with your experience. You're knowing it in some way. You may not be able to put it into words. You may not be able to lodge it directly in your memory, but you are with it in a way. And you can just allow yourself to continue, to kind of just stay with what's going on and trust that, even if you're not in a fully conscious or not ideally in a wakeful state, you're still with your experience. You're still connected with what is going on.

And then after the sitting comes the most important aspect or most important act of recollection. And I would say that after your sitting when it comes to reporting or journal writing, what is going on is that you have stepped outside of the meditative process. You're no longer meditating. So any thoughts or reflections don't necessarily bring you back into a meditative state or meditative process. Instead those reflections make you more conscious of what happened when you meditated. It is very similar to recalling dreams, of keeping a dream journal. When you write down your dreams in the morning, you don't necessarily go back into dreaming. And you may find that some of the states of mind or some of the impressions

and feelings you had while you were dreaming are very tenuous. They're fleeting, they're hard to get at. And you may find the exact same thing with meditation. That you don't quite have the language for it or you don't quite, you're not quite able to hold what that experience was. But it's enough that you know it. That you've reflected back and you know that you went through something that tenuous, that vague, that hard to grasp. That increases your awareness.

Now, if you were just going on, if you decided not to recollect, what's generally going to happen in your meditation practice is you're going to move from sitting to sitting and move from sitting and going out and taking care of your business and talking to people and getting involved in things, and you're not going to really have a sense of knowing some of the things that went on in the sitting. A few highlights will stick in your mind or a general mood or a general feeling may stay with you. But as far as really getting a sense of what goes on in your meditation sitting, that part will be lost. And the thing that seems to happen - it's like dreams - if you don't write down a dream sometimes, if you don't mull it over, after 2 or 3 days, it doesn't really exist anymore. You've completely forgotten it. What will happen then with the recollecting is you find that the sittings that you've remembered and recalled, when you have similar sittings, you're usually more awake, you're more attuned to what is happening. There's a certain familiarity. A sense of "I've been here before. I've been through this before." You may not have put it into words, but there is a strong sense that you know what this state of mind is. You know some of the patterns. You know kind of where it goes. You may not be able to predict it or anything like that, but you can get a sense of being more conscious of it than you would be otherwise.

Aspects of Receptivity

(transcribed from a talk)

People usually understand effort as doing something, as holding to a task and keeping up something. Receptivity is different than effort, though it requires a certain kind of effort. Being receptive is about surrendering to what comes up. It has to do with letting things in your experience come up and inform what you're going through.

If you are receptive during the day you might find that you're thinking about all sorts of things. Your mind is wandering and you're going all over

the place. In the same way, in meditation, when your mind is open and receptive to whatever comes up you may have feelings or memories come up that you don't particularly want; you may find that you're aware of certain things in your body that normally you'd block out.

With receptivity we often encounter resistance to our experience. We start to notice at first that we're not quite comfortable with what we're doing or with what's happening inside of us. Our discomfort with experience gets very strong and we want to do something about it.

So along with receptivity and resistance to what's going on there comes the question of tolerance. What is your level of tolerance, your real ability to tolerate yourself and to tolerate these different kinds of experiences? Whenever you reach points in meditation when you want to do something about discomfort you'll have a choice to make: Whether to continue to allow things to be as they are and to stay with the experience or to do something about it.

If it's a physical experience, pain or something that can be corrected by moving your posture, then you can do that. Don't worry about that. When it's more emotional, though, that's a different story. You might begin to wonder, "Do I really need to do something about this anxiety that's come up, or this sadness or this fear or this rage? Or can I sit with it?"

After you decide to sit with something you may notice that it gets stronger and stronger and you may feel, "That's it, I'm going to do something." You might decide to shift your attention away from that, to bring your attention to your body, or breath or sounds or to being kind to yourself around the rage. You might decide to generate something around the experience to make it more soothing and comfortable for you.

But if you do that I suggest you only do that for a little while and that you don't let it go on for the whole sitting or even for several minutes. Do it for enough time that it allows you to tolerate the experience or the experience shifts and changes for you. Then go back to staying with whatever comes up.

In this way, being receptive will help you build more tolerance towards uncomfortable experiences. The idea is not to get rid of these experiences. The idea is actually to see what they're like, to go through them, to see if your relationship with these experiences changes. See if you can start to have experiences where you're having more anxiety. You may find there are places where you're able to look at it, or you're able to disengage from it in a certain way - not intentionally, but that your mind is capable of doing that.

That's another thing about the receptive process: It's not about what you can do by intention, what you can do by telling yourself now I'm going to do this or now I'm going to do that. It's more about what your mind does naturally. We do adapt ourselves to working with particular types of experience. And you can trust that process, that it's a human process, that it's not something that is all that mysterious.

Along these lines, when your mind is going all over the place, perhaps for several minutes, and if you reach a point where you can no longer tolerate it, on occasion what you can do is perhaps to say, "I'll just bring my attention to my body, I'll just be aware of sounds, I'll just do that for a few seconds," and then let your attention go back to where it wants to go.

In that way, you're not developing ill will towards your thoughts. You're not deciding that you're always going to banish your thoughts. You're not in some kind of adversarial relationship with your thinking. Instead you may find that you're able to have a more balanced approach to your thinking.

You know your thinking goes on. It has a certain momentum, a certain force to it and that it's all right. It's all right to think in meditation, it's all right to have that kind of process go on. But over time, you may find, as you let it go on, you will start to be able to notice things about your thinking.

This is part of receptivity. At first it may be a bit painful and uncomfortable to find yourself so submerged in your thinking process. Then you might find after a while that you're no longer as submerged as you were before. You're just being patient with it and tolerant of it as you've started to shift your relationship to your thinking. This does require a certain degree of patience, perseverance and trust in the fact that your mind will eventually settle down or you will eventually start to get some perspective. You start to see what it is that you do.

Sometimes even when you're having a lot of thinking, you may find that there are moments where you pop up out of it and you notice, "Oh, I've been thinking about this." That's just enough at times, just for you to have little glimmers of what you've been going through in the thought process. You don't need to have the thinking go away.

You may also find that when your thinking dies down naturally, it doesn't seem to come back in the same way. Being receptive in this manner, you might find that when your thinking dies down, you're more or less aware of bodily sensations or feelings or sounds or your breath, whatever it is that starts to come into your awareness. That experience is what you're experiencing now. You don't need then to go back to a particular theme or something you were working on. You don't then need to look at your

thoughts or feelings that you were just having. You can just let yourself continue and go on from there.

What this will help you with is to develop greater flexibility. As people we tend to be rigid. Our minds want things to be a certain way and to stay a certain way. So even when there's a shift to something that's a bit more pleasant, we may want to go back to what we had before. Maybe the themes or the things you were thinking about went into an experience that wasn't all that pleasant, except that it actually felt quite juicy. So of course you want to go back there. You might notice what that pull is to go back into something that really you've already passed through.

At the end, when you write down the meditation sitting, you find you can go back, you can pick up a bit of what happened. In that kind of recollection, you're not only picking up what happened, but you're also picking up where you went to after that and then after that and then after that. So you're getting a different picture of what that experience is than you would inside the sitting if you'd tried to continually bring your attention back to what you were thinking about or working with before.

Recollection also serves the ability to drop things and move on. And it serves this type of flexibility.

The Lay of the Land Within

In a fictional piece I am currently working on, two of the characters are taking a journey through a dense jungle. One of the characters is new to the jungle, while the other is his guide. The guide uses a variety of means to determine whether they are following the right path, and some of those means, such as climbing trees atop hills to see the lay of the land, create a sense of uncertainty, of being hopelessly lost, to the one who is new to this jungle. Finally, after feeling anxious about whether he will get to the destination or not, this character asks the guide if he really does know the way. The guide's response is: "In the jungle, paths get overgrown in a matter of days. You must then rely on landmarks and what you can remember from previous journeys." The same is often true of our meditation sittings: the paths get overgrown and we feel lost until we have cleared away some of the obscurations and found a familiar, onward leading path again.

The meditation teachings most people are exposed to deal with "clearing away obscurations," giving the meditator tools to handle hindrances in skillful ways. Awareness of breathing, moment-to-moment awareness of the

senses, body scanning, metta practice, to name only the most common vipassana-samatha practices, are employed as skillful means to get beyond the hindrances to meditation and arrive at purified states of mind. These hindrances, when one is completely immersed in them, are like a vast jungle with no trails through it. A person may feel that there is no way to break away from any of the five hindrances (sense desire, ill-will, restlessness, laziness, and doubt) except by staying with what they have found to be the path that works for them.

Finding the various paths that lead to purification of mind is what "vipassana" and "samatha" meditation is all about. Some meditators may state their quest for purification of mind as finding the right teacher, the right school of Buddhism, the right practice, or the right ideas for them. Others may say that all paths lead to the same place and there is no one practice or teaching that is better than the others. And here we may find the two extremes of there being only one path, on the one hand, and the validation of all paths as leading to the same goal, on the other hand.

I look at this from outside these two extremes. The question that I consider important here is this: What happens within the consciousness of someone who follows a particular path (or meditation instructions)? One might suppose that by answering this question, it can be concluded that either there is one path to a particular goal or many paths. In actual practice however, what becomes understood is not the goal, but the path one is on. This shift of focus, from the goal to the path, is by no means something new; what makes it different here is that in order to look honestly and clearly at the path, the goal needs to be taken out of the picture, for by including it at this point in our understanding of the meditative process, we put our vision on that which is not present and tend to misread what is.

Each meditation instruction a person uses sets up a particular process. If we imagine consciousness to be like a flowing river, the effect of following an instruction in meditation is to divert that flow in another direction. What we want to do, however, is not divert the river's course but purify the water in it. And we are continually in this position of diverting the flow of our individual consciousness and trying to purify it at the same. These are two different types of activity, both of which make up the meditative process. For example, a person who meditates observing the in-breath and the out-breath, steers the flow of consciousness to focus more heavily on that activity, and thus pulls it away from going with the flow of thoughts, and at times during this the mind becomes purified as it has moments of being only aware of each breath. The meditative process is "determined" by the instruction of bringing one's attention back to the breath and by those

moments of mental purification that occur when one's attention is focused solely on the breath.

Views or beliefs pertaining to the true nature of things can also operate like meditation instructions, and thus become ways in which one tries to be. This is what we often do to influence consciousness to make it be other than what it is. Experiences of mental purification can come about through this influence, though they more often arise through less predictable means. Purification is more a result of the meditative process moving in a good direction, where more wholesome states of mind arise effortlessly, than it is a product of following a particular set of instructions or holding certain kinds of views. In fact, one interesting thing in all of this, which I believe most any experienced meditator can testify to, is that similar purifying experiences occur from following completely different instructions. Zen, Tantra, and Vipassana meditation practices can all lead to a host of similar, transformative states of mind, sometimes through completely different (and occasionally contradictory) instructions and beliefs.

I realize that the example above is a more or less ideal scenario, for the meditative process includes a third element, one that is often excluded from realm of meditation, but is found there much of time, which is none other than "oneself." Everyone who meditates has periods of planning, day-dreaming, worrying, scheming, revenge-taking, lusting after things, problem solving, contemplating existence, dozing off, getting upset, feeling sad, wanting something to change, wondering if this is going anywhere or not, -- the list is endless. These are the kinds of things our minds latch onto in meditation which are as fully a part of the meditative process as the instructions and the purification of mind. To exclude "oneself" from the meditative process would be to throw out much of what actually goes on in meditation.

Thus when we look at the question of what happens within the consciousness of someone who follows a particular path, we take into account the instructions one follows, the experiences of mental purification, and the various things our minds latch onto ("oneself"). These three elements of the meditative process are not the sum total of what goes on in our meditation sittings, as I am sure that more elements of the meditative process could be found as well. But this is not a scientific investigation in meditation; it is only a way for a meditator to become more aware of his/her own unique meditative process. By becoming aware of how instructions influence one's sittings, one not only understands the nature and intent of those instructions, but also important things about oneself. In becoming

more aware of a variety of purified states of mind, such states of mind can then be cultivated and practiced. And when one is more aware of oneself in meditation, it becomes possible to learn from negative states of mind, how to not get overwhelmed and dominated by them, and how they come to be and are able to flourish in the first place.

Now back to the feeling of being lost in the jungle. When the paths are overgrown, how do we find our way? We are having meditation sittings filled with obscurations and when we apply an instruction, it does not lead to a purified state of mind. Worse yet, our attempts at clearing a path don't reveal any hidden paths, but rather only more jungle. The process just can't be about instructions, purified states of mind, and "oneself." Here is where the knowledge of previous journeys, and the landmarks found on those journeys, comes in handy. There has to be a consciousness of the process, not in the present moment, but over time, from having known the lay of the land within, that helps us clear away the right obscurations at that time, opening up a familiar (or, sometimes, newly discovered) path towards mental purification.

Learning the lay of the land within requires reflecting back on one's meditation sittings. Awareness in the present moment is always a plus here, but sometimes the practice of always being in the present moment becomes so much about letting go of the past that many things get forgotten in one's meditations. Reflecting back on each sitting afterwards, or for a moment during it, can bring back to awareness things that otherwise would have been completely forgotten. Forgetting about totally unproductive trains of thought and negative emotional states may seem like a very good outcome from a meditation sitting; but what about forgetting how tranquility came about in the sitting, or not remembering a particular understanding one arrived at which produced an instant of mental clarity? For these are the "landmarks" which we need to know about to continue arriving at purified states of mind. When we don't recall these landmarks, we may not recognize them as such in future sittings.

A "landmark" in a meditation sitting can be almost anything. It doesn't have to be some deep meditative state, and, for the most part, it never is. Just as with someone trying to find his way through the jungle, losing the path momentarily, will look for what he recognizes as being near, or in the direction of, the path. For him, a landmark may be a large tree, a boulder, a stream. For example, in our meditation sittings, when we are bound up with planning something we will do later, we may remember how we had a sitting with similar planning going on and what our mind did that diminished it. We may recall that we knew a particular feeling associated with the

planning, and that perception lead to its decrease. Or we may recall having seen an image of the planned situation, and in our mind holding that image for a moment, the planning thoughts dissipated. There are many possible landmarks one can remember that cut through a particular hindrance and leave the mind serene. And the serenity is as much a landmark as that which leads to it, for it provides a sense of certainty that one has once again found the path through the jungle.

The Significance of Method in Meditation Practice

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Much of the literature on meditation practice is concerned with the application of certain methods of meditation and how they achieve beneficial results. An accepted meditation method is often held as beyond reproach, as if it is somehow perfect, and yet each and every meditation practice that has ever been devised has its blind spots, its inconsistencies, its superstitions and rules, its unfounded metaphysical beliefs and theories. However, because it is said to achieve certain results, or changes in people, these other aspects may go unexamined.

People are introduced to methods of meditation in a variety of ways, including books, articles, talks, workshops, retreats, and conversations with friends. Sometimes people make up their own methods, but usually the method of meditation one uses for an extended period of time comes from teachers of authority within various traditions.

When one walks into a meditation class, one is most likely going to be introduced to a method of meditation, which these days is almost always a practice of being aware of the breath. The environment is supportive of one doing the meditation method that is being advocated. Generally in such situations people are polite and compliant, though they may have some doubts and judgments flash through their minds on occasion. They feel it is a time to try something new, something that would be good for one to do, and it is not a time to be disagreeable and resistant.

The meditation sitting begins and everyone in the room is supposedly following the same instruction. But are they doing it the same way? Some people are trying to hold their attention on the breath and pushing away their thoughts. Others are getting caught up in thoughts and are constantly reminding themselves to return to the breath. Others are changing the way

they breathe so as to make it easier to be aware of the breath, while others are too acutely aware of each breath and are in a state of panic about how their breathing is going. There are several other scenarios that I could mention, but I think you get the picture. Each individual is having her own experience of doing that particular instruction.

People having different experiences following the same type of instruction is not a novel understanding of what goes on in meditation, and many experienced meditation teachers do take that into account. What is generally not taken into account is how individuals apply the same method differently. What needs to be called into question here is the assumption that because everyone got the same instruction they are all essentially doing the same thing

An individual sits down to meditate. What is she going to do? Most likely she will use a method she has heard from a teacher or read in a book. The instruction is followed in the way she understands it. On the surface it appears that she is sitting doing a meditation practice by following a particular instruction. So, say for example, she is trying to follow her breath at her nostrils, noting each inhalation and exhalation. Observing her breath at the nostrils and noticing it in that way is the method. The assumption would then be that what is going on in her meditation is that she is observing her breath because she is following that instruction.

This assumes that what goes on in meditation is the meditation practice one has intended to do. Why would that be the case? There is no reason to assume that just by having the intention to notice her breath that she would then sit and only notice her breath. Knowing the human mind, it would make more sense to assume that she would not be aware of her breath much of the time and would be thinking about all sorts of things during her meditation sitting. Her meditation sitting would mostly be made up of her individual thoughts, feelings, desires, tendencies, memories, etc. and not about the method of meditation she has adopted for the time being. In fact, the chosen method of meditation would have to yield to her individual temperament and inclinations, and would, by necessity, be tempered and altered by how she does it. For instance, she might find that being aware of the breath at the nostrils is too hard to feel, and so she may shift her attention to being aware of her lungs filling with air and expelling it, or her diaphragm moving up and down as she breathes. Someone with a different temperament might also find that the whole process of trying to observe her breath produces too much anxiety or frustration and so gives up on the idea; and still another might find that it is easy to stay with the breath, but still thoughts keep taking her attention from it.

The most one could say then about the relationship of one's chosen method of meditation and one's experience of doing it is that it is customized. It may change from one sitting to another, or from one period of time to another, but not because the method changes, but rather because each of us adapts any given method to our own temperaments and moods. In strict schools of meditation practice, such natural adaptation is frowned upon, for there is a belief in a pure method; and in those schools of practice, the students tend to believe that there is an absolutely right way of doing that particular meditation practice and that any other way is wrong. In this respect, the separation of a method from the person doing it is, by its very definition, an abstraction. A pure method is thus an ideal far removed from what is found in actual experience.

How do people take in meditation instructions? What are some of the different ways in which people use such instructions?

Let's start with one common way people take in instructions. First, there are those who try to follow them as stated, but also want to excel at following them. The attitude of following instructions to the letter and getting the most out of them is prevalent among many meditation practitioners. Such individuals will most likely push themselves to stick with the instruction and get it right at all costs, no matter how long it takes, or how much effort it involves. And when they feel they are doing it right, they are often filled with doubt; are they really doing it right? What if their teacher says they are not doing it right?

Another way some people take in instructions is to believe that they can't possibly get the instruction right, but will try anyhow. The instruction to "just be aware of the breath" sounds like an impossible feat for them, though they can perhaps imagine it happening. They follow the instruction with a pending sense of failure, convinced that they are not up to the task. So while that is their meditation method, they are in fact not using that method, but doing something else altogether.

In addition, there are those who may find themselves somewhere in between these two extremes, who follow an instruction exclusively and faithfully at times, while at other times decide to do something else, and so may not feel compelled to succeed or destined to fail at any one method. Thus there is a provisional way that such people may take in instructions, where when first introduced they wholeheartedly try to follow the instruction, but then, after a while, they include that instruction in their repertoire of meditation practices.

The Method of Recollective Awareness Meditation

For a beginning student of meditation, recollective awareness meditation is taught as a method, though it is a flexible method. The initial instruction is to be aware of the external contact of the touch of the hands, one on top of the other in one's lap, or the contact of one's feet, legs, or rear touching the seat or cushion, while allowing one's thoughts and feelings to be as they are. In the course of a meditation sitting, it is all right to be caught up in thoughts, feelings, memories, plans, or anything that draws one's attention. At times one can gently bring one's attention back to the contact of one's hands or of one's body sitting on the cushion, but one need not keep one's attention there, rather one can allow one's mind to be drawn back into thoughts if that is what is happening. So, in contrast to standard meditation practices of, say, observing the breath, one does not try to keep one's attention in one place, nor does one stop one's thoughts.

Since thinking is included in the meditation sitting, meditating with thoughts is acceptable. This makes a big difference as to how someone will experience the method. There will be less concern about whether one is doing it right or wrong, as it is not clear what success or failure is in this method. What will come up more frequently are doubts as to whether this is meditation. But that is OK, and even desirable, as from the outset the method one is using is up for critical examination. So even at the beginning of learning this form of meditation, the student is not required to be compliant and only follow the instructions given. In fact, a student can ignore the beginning instructions altogether and do some other kind of practice and still benefit from this approach.

The reason for this benefit is the next step in this approach, which is to recollect what happens in each meditation sitting; hence the name. The instruction is to recollect the sitting after it is over. After the sitting ends, the student takes a couple of minutes to reflect back over the sitting and see what she remembers about it. This need not be done sequentially, but rather beginning with what one remembers best about the sitting. From remembering a few things that happened in the sitting, it follows that some more of the meditation sitting will come to mind. One does not need to force oneself to remember most of what went on in the meditation sitting; whatever one remembers is enough to begin two additional steps in this approach: the reporting or journaling process.

Journaling or reporting one's meditation sitting to another is optional after each sitting, but at some time a student of this approach will have to talk to a teacher and/or keep a journal of her meditation sittings. There are several reasons for this, but the main one is that the teaching of meditation is done

through what the student experiences and through bringing what goes on in meditation more clearly into the student's awareness, rather than giving the student meditation instructions. The only meditation instructions in this approach are the initial instructions. Thereafter, all guidance comes out of the student's recollections, and thus is highly individualized and contextualized within the student's ongoing self-exploration and practice of the Dharma.

In this approach to meditation, students walk into a meditation class and receive the initial instruction given earlier, as well as instruction for those who already have a meditation practice or have done different types of meditation. For people who have meditated before, the opening instruction is to do the practice one has been doing. No one is required to change his or her way of meditating, though everyone is asked to be willing and open to explore their current meditation practice. People are given permission not to do that practice, and invited to try the beginning instructions or do some other meditation practice that they have wanted to try. So, basically, it comes down to people being able to do whatever they like during their meditation sittings with the condition that they will recollect and perhaps then notice things about their meditation practice.

They are given three additional suggestions. One is to be gentle with their experience, whatever they are experiencing. The second is to allow thinking into their meditation sittings. Lastly, they are encouraged to let their minds drift towards sleep and are permitted to fall asleep during the meditation period.

Many people trying out this method encounter more thinking at the beginning of the sitting, and often wonder if this is meditation. But because thinking is being allowed, there is less conflict about it, less self-judgment over having thoughts, and fewer attempts to stop thinking or slow it down or divert it. The thinking usually quiets down on its own after a while when accepted in this way, and, if it doesn't, it is not a failure, but rather something that one could become interested in. For instance, instead of being merely swept along in what one is planning to do after the meditation class, one might find one's attention shifting to becoming interested in how such plans pull one along, and what it is that is so engrossing about them.

As in any meditation method, one may think one is not doing it right even though there is no single right way to do it. In this approach one would then become more aware of one's need to find a right way to do things. In a similar vein, if one feels unable to do this form of meditation, then that obstruction to meditating, being one's feelings of inadequacy, becomes something one experiences and brings into greater awareness through the

meditation practice. Thus instead of defining one's self as someone who cannot do this practice, as could happen with methods that have a definite set of instructions to follow all the time, one is doing this practice by experiencing and looking into the thoughts and feelings of not being able to do this practice.

To clearly define this approach to meditation, at some point or another a student may be instructed to be completely receptive to their experience in meditation and not to do anything to change it. It will then seem as though the right way of meditating is to be completely passive and accepting of all experience, and that whenever one decides to direct one's attention or do a particular practice, one is no longer following this approach. It is just as easy to become rigid about this approach as any other.

But this approach is extremely flexible. One can do most any of the various meditation practices, but not as a technique. Instead of deciding to be aware of the breath in a certain manner, which would be a technique, one becomes aware of the breath when one's attention is naturally drawn to it. Thus one is first aware of the breath before deciding to fix one's attention on it, which makes it easier to stay with the breath, since one's attention is most likely not being pulled away from it by thoughts. One's attention may only stay with the breath for a short while before moving onto something else, but in that short while one would have effortlessly been with the breath and would have experienced what it is like to be with the breath. In doing so, one would experience the benefits of observing the breath without using a technique of constantly bringing one's attention back to it.

As I mentioned earlier, one aspect of this approach is the opportunity to report one's sitting. Therefore meditation students who practice this approach sometimes feel as though they have to remember their sittings in detail. So one side-effect of this approach is going over one's sitting during the sitting, trying to recall each and every little thing that happened. In going over the sitting, one might begin telling the teacher or a friend about what one was experiencing. If this happens on occasion, it is not a problem, and may even be useful; but if it happens to excess, it might be best to stop reporting or journaling afterwards and see if that cuts down the amount of time spent retelling one's experiences during the sitting.

All meditation methods produce benefits, as well as problems and side effects. The fact that a meditation practice is beneficial for a period of time or creates problems for one does not mean that it is the right or wrong practice for someone. The way one meditates may undergo several changes over the course of many years of practice, and part of the skill in meditating is recognizing when a particular technique or style of meditation is no

longer working the way it once did. These methods are merely helping us become aware, wise, and compassionate, and we may go through many of them on our journey towards liberation of mind.

Unmasking Meditation Instructions

The key to understanding meditation instructions lies in the fact that they lay the foundation for one's experience of meditation. The instructions inform how one begins a meditation sitting, what one will do in the sitting, and what direction the sitting should go in. Behind those meditation instructions are three basic principles:

- Rules to meditate by
- Embedded concepts
- Ideal scenarios

In following meditation instructions, one does not learn how to meditate, but rather one learns a set of rules and how to apply them to meditation practice.

To give you an idea of what I mean by rules, I will list two of the most common rules:

- One must always stay with the meditation instruction one is practicing.
- One must do the instruction perfectly to realize the perfection of the instruction (and, by inference, one's own perfection). Not doing the instruction perfectly leads to failure.

Let's take a common meditation instruction as an example. A person is instructed to be aware of the breath at the nostrils. He is simply told: Be aware of each and every in-breath and out-breath at the nostrils. Do that for twenty minutes. He sits down and brings his attention to the nostrils, but before long he is thinking about things. He stops his thoughts so that he can become aware of his breath. A breath or two later he starts thinking again, and so brings his attention back to his breath. Without even realizing it, he has just set up a rule, which he will follow for the rest of meditation sitting: When my attention wanders from the breath, I must always bring it back to the breath. Wandering from the breath becomes prohibited. One might go as far to say, after meditating with such a rule, that when one's attention is not on the breath, one is not meditating. Sure enough, after several sittings of defining meditation as having one's attention only on the breath, such a

meditator will have developed an elaborate set of rules that govern his meditation practice. He will have rules regarding changing or modifying his breathing rhythm, when it is acceptable and when it is not; rules concerning his body posture, bodily movements in the meditation sitting, and which bodily sensations can be focused on and which cannot; and rules as to what might be a permissible distraction from the breath and how long such a distraction should be permitted to last. This last set of rules, regarding permissible distractions, may only be made if the practice of being aware of the breath is supposed to lead to something else, such as a vision or blissful state of consciousness, or if the awareness of breathing practice is taught to include other sense experience, such as sounds, bodily sensations, etc.

Along with rules, meditation instructions include acceptable rule-breakers. These are generally strategies that are employed in the service of the instructions. When, for example, one is having difficulty staying with the in and out breath in meditation, one may break the rule of always being with the breath to employ a strategy to make being with the breath easier. A strategy can take many forms, and is the most common type of advanced meditation instruction given to meditators.

Flip through almost any book on meditation and you will find many a helpful strategy. Most of the strategies are given in the service of getting back to doing the instruction with renewed vigor and greater discipline. In the example above, a meditation student who is having difficulty staying with the breath for even a few seconds in a meditation sitting may benefit from a strategy, which, at first, breaks the rule of his sitting practice. He may then be given the instruction to bring his attention to his whole body sitting and begin to observe his breath from that vantage point, instead of keeping his attention firmly on his breath at the nostrils. Once this kind of strategy works however, the rules around meditating correctly go back into place, and one returns to one's core meditation practice. That is, the strategy rarely ever becomes the beginning of a new kind of meditation practice for the student.

Concepts Embedded in Instructions

This is a phenomenon that I became much more aware of when I began teaching meditation than when I was a student. As a student, I would just do the instruction diligently, thinking that the instruction was helping me see things the way they truly are. When I was observing my breath, for instance, I believed that the instruction to notice the rise and fall of my abdomen was getting me to see the fundamental truth of rising or falling, or as my

teachers put it, the arising and passing away of phenomena. I didn't realize it until I heard it from students I was teaching, that this was just a concept embedded in the instruction. What is going on when this happens is that one is seeing the experience through a particular lens, a specific view on the nature of one's experience which is to be known, confirmed, and verified by following that particular instruction.

Other concepts that are embedded in instructions: being aware of each breath is being in the present moment; moving sensations up and down your body (body scanning) is purifying your mind and producing wisdom; and staying with the mantra is being with the true transcendent reality and eliminates the grasping ego. These concepts are not just tagged onto the instruction as an afterthought, but are as much a part of the instruction as the rules inherent in the instruction. One reason perhaps why people are reluctant to break the rules in instructions is that if they do, the promise of realizing the concept embedded in them may not come to pass. It would be as if by deciding to drop the practice of staying with the breath as the primary object of meditation, one would never find a way to be in the present moment or know how things arise and pass away.

This makes me think that perhaps for some meditators the rightness of the instruction may come from perceived rightness of the concept embedded in it. The thinking goes like this: If I believe in this particular concept, say that being in the present moment is ultimate reality and the highest truth, then I will learn an instruction that will lead me to being in the present moment all the time. The idea, or promise of the idea, basically sells the meditation instruction.

Then there are concepts that operate as instructions on their own: just let go, do not cling to anything, be in the present moment, accept all that comes, be equanimous, love yourself, empty your mind, and a host of others. Some meditators may sit down to meditate and believe that they are not meditating with any instructions. They are just going to sit and let go of things, or empty their minds, or accept all that comes, instead of observing their breath or reciting a mantra or doing any such task-oriented instruction.

What makes these meditation practices conceptual is that they start with an idea as to what being in the present moment is, for example, and not from someone's experience of being in the present moment. Some students may be given the idea that being in the present moment means that there is no past and no future, that the true reality is only in the present. This makes sense intellectually, and this understanding of the concept is then used to as a guide to correctly meditating in the present moment, which often then

entails stopping one's attention from pursuing thoughts that go into the past or into the future. Other techniques might be used along with this concept of the present moment, such as a practice of observing one's breath, to help keep the student in the present and re-enforce the idea that being in the present is the only true reality.

Concepts are thus embedded in meditation instructions in two ways. One is that the instruction is given in order to understand a particular idea (have a specific realization or insight), as in observing the breath so as to understand how things arise and pass away. The other way is that of an idea being taught for the purpose of one realizing it in one's meditation experience, as in being present to one's experience so as to be in the Now.

Is it possible for people to meditate without embedded concepts? That is a question I will try to examine in other articles. But, for the moment, I would have to say that any meditation practice someone picks up has embedded concepts, just as it has rules to meditate by and ideal scenarios attached to it.

Ideal Scenarios

People have ideals regarding meditative experience when they talk about an experience they have not had. For beginning meditators that is often just the way it is; they have only the mental pictures and ideas about meditative experiences and may be meditating in order to have those experiences for themselves. But those experiences have to fit the idea they have of those experiences for them to be legitimate. What if the actual experiences are different from the idea one has of them? Then isn't one just pursuing a fantasy?

Few, if any, meditation students ever consider this to be a problem, for the ideals about meditative experience seem to be so generally accepted that people are easily led to believe that these ideal states of mind are indeed based on reality. Let's take for example the ideal that the optimum meditative state is one that is free of thoughts. It is usually conceived to be a pure (luminous) state of consciousness where thinking does not occur. With the absence of thinking, there is no self or ego, and thus the mind is pure. It also must be an awake, peaceful, and sublime state of mind, though some traditions might consider it to be more ordinary than sublime. Anyhow, the student gets the idea that to be empty of thoughts is an ideal meditative state, one which is only to be achieved by practicing the prescribed meditation instructions meant to get one there.

This approach makes perfect sense. One has an ideal state of consciousness to be realized through meditation and a practice to get one there. What is missing from this scenario is the real difficulties one encounters in meditating with that practice, for it is presented as a formula, which when followed correctly is believed to lead to the right outcome: freedom from thoughts. The student thus meditates according to the instructions so that an ideal state of mind becomes a constant state of mind (which is an ideal upon an ideal, for the student believes that ideal states are ideally constant). This way of meditating can turn any experience which is not ideal into a negative or unproductive or worthless state of mind.

I hear this kind of sitting often from students who practice trying arrive at ideal scenarios for their meditation sittings. A student goes into the meditation sitting to empty his mind of thoughts and finds himself thinking all the time. All thinking is seen as an obstacle, a hindrance, and even as a defilement. It must be gotten rid of somehow. So he tries holding his attention on the breath, a mantra, an internal image or feeling, or on sounds to see if he can free himself from thinking. But thinking keeps intruding into his meditation sitting. He may then put his attention on catching the moment where each thought begins, hoping thereby to cut it off at the root. All of his energy is focused on the elimination of thinking, so as to arrive at states of mind where there is no thinking. This state of no thinking is what meditation is supposed to be, or at least lead to, and yet what meditation has become is a battleground to eliminate thought. What the meditation student is actually going through is a process of trying to get rid of thinking, but what he thinks he is going through is a process of realizing an idealized state of mind where there is no thought. When this kind of meditation sitting is looked at without the ideal scenario coloring one's perception of it, the student sees that he is using aggressive effort to suppress thoughts.

The ideal scenario thus tends to hide what is really going on in one's meditation sittings. When I hear students talk about sittings in terms of such scenarios, it has an air of looking good by at least attempting to meditate correctly (in that form of meditation), even though their meditation experiences look bad to them much of the time. Meeting an ideal is not easy. It may not even be possible. So anyone trying to do it will often fail and carry with them the feeling of failing at meditation, instead of seeing that realizing an ideal is not much different from making a fantasy come true. Both have a picture of how things should be and obscure or distract one from how things are.