

## DETAIL FROM NINE STAGES OF SHAMATHA MEDITATION

### The Attention Revolution: Unlocking the Power of the Focused Mind

*Alan Wallace*

#### **Appendix: Synopsis of the Nine Stages**

**Step=What is achieved=The power by which that is achieved=What problems persist**

- 1. Directed Attention**=One is able to direct the attention to the chosen object=Learning the instructions=There is no attentional continuity on the object
- 2. Continuous Attention**=Attentional continuity on the chosen object up to a minute=Thinking about the practice=Most of the time the attention is not on the object
- 3. Resurgent Attention**=Swift recovery of distracted attention, mostly on the object=Mindfulness=One still forgets the object entirely for brief periods
- 4. Close Attention**=One no longer completely forgets the chosen object=Mindfulness, which is now strong=Some degree of complacency concerning samadhi
- 5. Tamed Attention**=One takes satisfaction in samadhi=Introspection=Some resistance to samadhi
- 6. Pacified Attention**=No resistance to training the attention=Introspection=Desire, depress, lethargy, drowsiness
- 7. Fully Pacified Attention**=Pacification of attachment, melancholy and lethargy=Enthusiasm=Subtle imbalances of the attention, swiftly rectified
- 8. Single-pointed Attention**=Samadhi is long, sustained without any excitation or laxity=Enthusiasm=It still takes effort to ward off excitation and laxity
- 9. Attentional balance**=Flawless samadhi is long, sustained effortlessly=Familiarity=Attentional imbalances may recur in the future

**Coarse excitation:** The attention completely disengages from the meditative object.

**Medium excitation:** Involuntary thoughts occupy the center of attention, while the meditative object is displaced to the periphery.

**Subtle excitation:** The meditative object remains at the center of attention, but involuntary thoughts emerge at the periphery of attention.

## **First stage: Directed Attention**

### **Progression**

The first of the nine stages leading to the achievement of shamatha is called *directed attention*. The sign of having reached this stage is simply being able to place your mind on your chosen object of meditation for even a second or two. If you are trying to direct your attention to a difficult object, such as a complex visualization, this may take days or weeks to accomplish. But if your chosen object is your breathing, you may achieve this stage of your first attempt.

... The first stage of directed attention is achieved by the power of *hearing*.

... Thus our practice of mindfulness of breathing consists of prolong our awareness of our breath. While this requires an alert mind, such concentration should not be tense but rather balanced. When we discover that we have become distracted from the mend object, it may feel natural to clamp down more forcefully, tightly concentrating the mind. You can see this in the facial expressions of people who try to concentrate in this way.

### **The Practice**

[Posture, seated and supine]

Be at ease. Be still. Be vigilant. These three qualities of the body are to be maintained throughout all meditation sessions. Once you have settled your body with these three qualities, take three slow, gentle, deep breaths, breathing in and out through the nostrils. Let your awareness permeate your entire body as you do so, noting any sensations that arise in relation to the respiration. Luxuriate in these breaths, as if you were receiving a gentle massage from within.

Now settle your respiration in its natural flow. Continue breathing through your nostrils, noting the sensations of the respiration wherever they arise within your body. Observe the entire course of each in- and out-breath, noting whether it is long or short, deep or shallow, slow or fast. Don't impose any rhythm on your breathing. Attend closely to the respiration, but without willfully influencing it in any way. Don't even prefer one kind of a breath over another, and don't assume that rhythmic breathing is necessarily better than irregular breathing. Let the body breathe as if you were fast asleep, but mindfully vigilant.

... When you note that you have become distracted, instead of tightening up and forcing your attention back to the breath, simply let go of these thoughts and distractions. Especially with each out-breath, relax your body, release extraneous thoughts, and happily let your attention settle back into the body.

... Continue practicing for one twenty-four-minute period, then mindfully emerge from meditation and reengage with the world around you.

## **Second stage: Continuous Attention**

### **Progression**

In the second of the nine stages, *continuous attention*, you experience occasional periods of continuity, but most of the time your mind is still caught up in wandering

thoughts and sensory distractions. Don't be misled by the name of this stage. Continuous attention doesn't mean that you can maintain unbroken continuity for long stretches, but that now and again you can remain centered for a sustained period without completely losing track of your object of attention. However, time and again you will still lapse back into coarse excitation, completely forgetting about the intended object of attention. When you occasionally maintain continuity of awareness of bodily sensations for about a minute, you have reached the second stage.

The second stage is achieved by the power of *thinking*.

### **Practice: Mindfulness of Breathing with Stability**

Begin this session, as you did before, by settling your body in its rest state, imbued with the three qualities of relaxation, stillness, and vigilance. With your awareness permeating the tactile sensations throughout your body, take three slow, deep breaths, observing the sensations of the breath filling your torso from the belly up to the chest. Then let your respiration return to its natural rhythm and simply be present with the breath for several minutes, breathing as effortlessly as you can.

With this preparation, you establish a basis in relaxation. Without losing this sense of ease, now shift your emphasis to the cultivation of attentional stability. This is the ability to sustain the focus of your attention without becoming fragmented or derailed by the force of distracting thoughts and sensations. With this aim, instead of begin mindful of the various sensations of respiration throughout your whole body, focus your attention just on the sensations of the expansion and contraction of your abdomen with each in- and out-breath. As you did before, note the duration of each inhalation and exhalation, and observe the duration of the pauses between breaths.

[Count breaths] Let these mental counts be brief, so that your attention to the counting doesn't override your awareness of the breath itself. ... Let the counting remind you to keep your attention focused on the tactile sensations of the breath, which change from moment to moment. After counting the breath at the beginning of the inhalation, let your mind be as conceptually silent as possible for the remainder of the in-breath. And during the out-breath, release any involuntary thoughts that have cropped up. As mentioned before, arouse your attention (counteracting laxity) during the in-breath, and relax your attention (counteracting excitation) with each out-breath. ... In this way, with each complete breath, you remedy the two major defects of attention.

Meditation is a balancing act between attention and relaxation. Mastering this requires working to counter the natural reflex of trying harder, or clamping down, when you see that your mind has become distracted. Instead, as soon as you see that your mind has wandered, release the effort of clinging to the distracting thought or physical sensation, return to the breath, and relax more deeply. Remember that the main point of such attentional training is not to stop thought from arising. Rather, it is first to relax the body and mind, then to cultivate the stability of sustaining attention continuously upon your chosen object. Thoughts are bound to arise. Simply do your best not to be carried away by them.

### **Third stage: Resurgent Attention**

#### **Progression**

When you reach the third stage, *resurgent attention*, during each practice session your attention is fixed most of the time upon your meditative object. By now, you will have increased the duration of each session beyond the initial twenty-four minutes to perhaps twice that. As your attention gradually stabilizes, you may increase the duration of each session by increments of three minutes. At all times, though, value the *quality* of your meditation over the *quantity* of time spent in each session. If you sit for long periods but let your mind rove around unnoticed among distractions or fall into dullness, not only are you wasting your time, but also you are developing bad habits that will only get harder and harder to break.

When you were still on the second stage, although you experienced periods when your attention was continually engaged with the meditative object for as long as a minute, most of the time you were still caught up in distractions. When you reach the third stage, your attentional stability has increased so that most of the time you remain engaged with the object. Occasionally there are still lapses when you completely forget the object, but you quickly recognize them and patch up these holes in the continuity of attention. Long before you achieve this stage, you may occasionally have a session in which your mind seems to remain on the object most of the time. But don't be fooled! Even amateur golfers occasionally hit a birdie, but that doesn't mean they're ready to go on the pro circuit. The third stage is achieved only when your mind remains focused on the object most of the time in virtually all your sessions.

... As you continue in this practice, in order to progress through the stages of attentional development, you need to hone the ability to monitor the quality of your attention. While the main force of your awareness is directed to the meditation object with *mindfulness*, this needs to be supported with the faculty of *introspection*, which allows for the quality control of attention, enabling you to swiftly note when the mind has fallen into either excitation or laxity. As soon as you detect either imbalance, take the necessary steps to remedy it. Your first antidote to excitation is to relax more deeply; to counteract laxity, arouse your attention.

Throughout all the first three stages, involuntary thoughts flow like a cascading waterfall. But over time, these currents of compulsive ideation carry you away less and less frequently. Coarse excitation gradually subsides, even though thoughts and mental images continue to crop up, as do sounds, smells, and other sensory appearances. Don't try to block out these distractions. Simply let them go and refocus your attention as single-pointedly as you can on your chosen object of meditation.

... If you are practicing for only a session or two each day, you may not progress beyond the second attentional stage. The reason of this is simple: if you are balancing your attention for an hour or so each day, but letting it become fragmented and distracted for the other fifteen hours of waking time each day, then the attentional coherence cultivated during these brief sessions is overwhelmed by the distractions of the rest of the day. The achievement of the stage of resurgent attention requires a greater commitment to practice.

This will entail multiple sessions of meditation each day, practiced within a quiet, contemplative way of life that supports the cultivation of inner calm and collectedness. The key to success is to conduct your life between sessions in such a way that you don't lose the ground you have gained.

**Practice: Mindfulness of Breathing with Vividness**

Begin this twenty-four-minute session, as always, by settling your body in its rest state, imbued with the three qualities of relaxation, stillness, and vigilance. Take three slow, deep breaths, breathing down into the abdomen and then into the chest. Let your awareness permeate your body, feeling the sensations of the respiration wherever they arise. Then let your breath flow of its own accord, settling into its natural rhythm.

Mentally, the initial emphasis in shamatha practice is on relaxation, which can be induced by attending to the sensations of breathing throughout the body. The second emphasis is on stability of attention, and for this it can be helpful to observe the sensations of breathing in the region of the belly. Then, having established a foundation of relaxation and stability, we shift the emphasis to cultivating vividness of attention. It is crucially important that stability is not gained at the expense of relaxation, and that the increase of vividness does not coincide with the decrease of stability. The relationship among these three qualities can be likened to the roots, trunk, and foliage of a tree. As your practice grows, the roots of relaxation go deeper, the trunk of stability gets stronger, and the foliage of vividness reaches higher.

In this practice session, shift the emphasis to vividness. You do this by elevating the focus of attention and directing it to a subtler object. Direct your attention to the tactile sensations of your breath at the apertures of your nostrils or above your upper lip, wherever you feel the in- and out-flow of your breath. Elevating the focus of attention helps to induce vividness, and attending to a subtle object enhances that further. Observe these sensations at the gateway of the respiration, even between breaths. There is an ongoing flow of tactile sensations in the area of the nostrils and upper lip, so sustain your attention there as continuously as possible. If the breath becomes subtle that you can't detect the sensations of its flow, quiet your mind and observe more carefully. As you arouse the vividness of attention, eventually the sensations of the breath will become evident again.

On the periphery of your awareness, you may still note other sensations throughout your body, as well as sounds and so on. Just let them be, without trying to block them out, and focus your attention single-pointedly on the sensations around the apertures of your nostrils.

Count your breaths if you find this helpful. Arouse your faculty of introspection so that you quickly note whether excitation or laxity has arisen, and take the necessary steps to balance the attention when such problems occur. Continue practicing for one twenty-four-minute period, then bring the session to a close.

## **Fourth stage: Close Attention**

### **Progression**

By maintaining continuity of this training in a retreat setting, you will eventually achieve the fourth of the nine stages of attentional development, called close attention. At this point, due to the power of enhanced mindfulness, you no longer completely forget your chosen object, the tactile sensations of the breath at the nostrils. You may have experienced glimpses of this level of attentional stability intermittently before actually achieving this stage, but now it has become normal. Each of your sessions may no last an hour or longer, and throughout this time, your attention cannot be involuntarily drawn entirely away from the object. You are now free of coarse excitation. It's as if the attention has acquired a kind of gravity such that it can't be easily buffeted by gusts of involuntary thoughts and sensory distractions.

At this stage it is said that you achieve the *power of mindfulness*.

### **Practice: Mindfulness of Breathing with the Acquired Sign**

After settling your body and respiration in their natural states, continue focusing your attention on the bare sensations of the breath at the apertures of your nostrils. At this stage in the practice, your respiration will be very calm and the tactile sensations of the breath will be correspondingly very subtle. They may even become so faint that you can't detect them at all. When that happens, it is important not to assume that there are no sensations, nor should you deliberately breathe more vigorously so that you can pick up those sensations again. Rather, observe more and more closely until you do detect the very subtle sensations of your breath.

As discussed previously, this is a unique quality of the breath as a meditation object. In other methods for developing shamatha, the object is bound to become more and more evident as you progress in the practice. But with the technique of mindfulness of breathing, as your practice deepens, the breath becomes more and more subtle, which challenges you to arouse greater and greater vividness of attention. So rise to this challenge as you simultaneously cultivate a deeper sense of relaxation, stronger stability and brighter vividness.

Allow your respiration, which represents the "air element" of lightness and movement, to carry the healing, balancing, soothing process deeper and deeper. Habitual mental images, arising involuntarily, will be superimposed on your sense impressions, including tactile sensations. In this practice, you are like a chemist separating out the impurities of superimpositions from the pure strain of the tactile sensations of the breath. As superimpositions are released, the sense of your body having definite physical borders fades and you enter deeper and deeper levels of tranquility.

In the phases of mindfulness of breathing thus far, you have been attending in various ways to the tactile sensations of the respiration. However, to continue all the way along the path of shamatha, eventually you must shift your attention from the tactile sensations of breathing to an "acquired sign" (Pali *uggaha-nimitta*), a symbol of the air element that appears before the mind's eye as you progress in shamatha practice. To different people,

acquired signs associated with the breath practice may appear like a star, a cluster of gems or pearls, wreath of flowers, a puff of smoke, a cobweb, a cloud, a lotus flower, a wheel, or the moon or sun. The various appearances of the acquired sign are related to the mental dispositions of individual meditators. If you wish to continue on the path of mindfulness of breathing—which here explicitly turns into “mindfulness with breathing”—as soon as such a sign arises, shift your attention to this sign. This will be your object of attention as you proceed along the rest of the nine stages leading to shamatha.

At first your sign will arise only sporadically, so when it disappears, return to the previous sensations of the breath. But eventually it will appear more regularly and steadily, and from that point onward, focus your attention on this object. As you progress in this practice, increase the duration of your sessions for as long as you are able to maintain a quality of attention relatively free of laxity and excitation.

[Note: Indo-Tibetan Mahayana tradition emphasizes that advances stages along the path to shamatha can be achieved only by focusing on a mental object, not a sensory impression. Thus acquired signs consisting of tactile sensations would not be favored.]

... Many meditators emphasize vividness in their practice because they know that this brings them a kind of “high.” But the lasting achievement of vividness has two prerequisites, relaxation and stability. If you want to develop exceptional vividness, first develop relaxation, second develop stability, and then finally increase vividness. Underlying all these aspects of attention must be a foundation of equanimity, without which strong attentional and emotional vacillations will likely persist indefinitely. A general sign of spiritual progress is imperturbability in the face of the vicissitudes of life, and for this, equanimity is the key.

[at 157: The Theravada tradition gives this specific description of achieving shamatha by way of mindfulness of the respiration: You begin this practice, as described earlier by focusing on the tactile sensations of the breath which are the “sign for preliminary practice (*parikamma-nimitta*). Eventually you shift your attention to the acquired sign (*uggaha-nimitta*) of the breath, which becomes your meditative object until you achieve shamatha, at which point a third sign appears spontaneously. This is called the counterpart sign (*patibhaga-nimitta*) of the breath, which is a subtle, emblematic representation of the whole quality of the air element.