

PART I: AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS – THE FOUR MILESTONES AND 10 STAGES IN THE PROGRESS OF MEDITATIVE TRAINING

The development of this training can be divided into 10 fairly distinctive stages that can be usefully defined and used as an aid to measuring our progress. By identifying which of these stages he or she is at, the meditator can then determine how best to proceed in their practice for continued progress into the next stage.

Within these ten stages, there are also four major achievement levels, or turning points, that serve as significant milestones marking the overall progress in development of these skills. Although these four milestones are identified primarily in terms of progress in concentration, if the meditator is using these 10 stages for guidance, progress in the development of full-minded awareness will take place in tandem with concentration. A warning is in order here. It is very important not to sacrifice the development of full-minded awareness for sake of rapid progress in concentration. To do so will lead to the development of *concentration with dullness*, and this will result in very pleasurable meditative states that are dead-ends in themselves, leaving the meditator without the capacity for full-minded awareness necessary for achieving the ultimate objective of the practice, which is the investigation of experiential phenomena culminating in knowledge of the true nature of reality. If the reasons for this are not completely clear, please reread the Introduction.

The four milestone achievements are:

- 1. Uninterrupted continuity of attention to the meditation object**
- 2. Exclusive focus on the meditation object (i.e. single-pointedness of attention)**
- 3. Effortless stability of the attention (i.e. the compliant mind)**
- 4. Imperturbability persisting beyond the sitting practice**

The 10 stages in the progress of meditative training are:

1. Establishing a Practice.

This stage is characterized by a lack of consistency and regularity in sitting, and by meditation time often being spent doing something other than the practice – daydreaming, problem solving, etc.

The problems that must be overcome are procrastination and resistance, lack of motivation, boredom, fatigue, disappointment and doubt.

These problems are overcome through deliberate review of one's purpose in meditating and generation of strong motivation, through creation of a practice routine, through goal-setting with regard to practice, and through cultivation of discipline and *diligence*.

Mastery of this stage has occurred when the meditator doesn't miss a daily practice session except when absolutely unavoidable, and when the meditator rarely if ever indulges in procrastinatory 'time-passing' activities while waiting for their practice time to end.

2. Interrupted Continuity of Attention to the Meditation Object

This stage is characterized by long periods of mind wandering with relatively short periods of attention to the meditation object.

The untrained mind is naturally restless, and the problem is forgetting what it is that we are doing, or trying to do.

To overcome this one trains in *introspective awareness* so that one notices when the mind has wandered. After *directing the attention* back to the meditation object, one learns to *sustain the attention* for longer periods of time by *actively engaging* with and investigating the meditation object.

When, in the duration of a one-hour sit, it can consistently be said that the amount of time the attention has been focused on the meditation object is distinctly longer than the time that it has been forgotten, and when the typical period of sustained attention is measured in minutes while the periods of mind-wandering can be measured in seconds, then meditator has mastered the second stage and has entered the third stage.

3. Extended Continuity of Attention to the Meditation Object

This stage is also characterized by periods of mind wandering, but they are relatively short compared to the periods of attention to the meditation object.

Another problem that tends to emerge at this stage is dozing off. So there is still the problem of mind wandering and now the new problem of falling asleep.

Introspective awareness is further developed so that the meditator becomes aware of the process by which mind wandering occurs and takes action before the mind wanders. The meditator also learns to recognize when sleepiness is beginning to develop, and to take action before it becomes too strong. Perception of the meditation object becomes increasingly vivid and intense as more *full-minded awareness* is developed, and the attention is more easily sustained on the meditation object for longer periods of time.

This stage has been mastered when the attention to the meditation object is rarely if ever lost, either to mind wandering or to sleep.

4. Uninterrupted Continuity of Attention to the Meditation Object

This stage is characterized by uninterrupted continuity of attention to the meditation object, but there are many other distractions present in the awareness at the same time, and sometimes these other thoughts and sensations are even more prominent in the awareness than the meditation object itself. When this occurs they can be called ***gross distractions***. Then, whenever the mind ceases to be agitated, it tends to slip into ***strong dullness***

The defining problem of this stage is finding a balance where there is neither gross distraction nor strong dullness. Subtler forms of distraction and dullness are tolerated. Another significant challenge is resisting the temptation to indulge in the powerful intellectual and emotional insights and visionary experiences that tend to arise at this stage.

Invoking ***introspective awareness*** becomes a habit, and alerts the meditator to the presence of gross distraction and strong dullness. An increased ***vigorousness of intention*** to observe every detail of the meditation object raises the energy level of the mind to overcome strong dullness. Very closely observing the meditation object, but in a more relaxed way because it has by this time become quite familiar, overcomes gross distraction. The exercise of ***diligence*** overcomes the tendency to deviate from the practice.

The fourth stage has been mastered and freedom from gross distractions and strong dullness has been achieved when the physical sensations, thoughts and emotions that arise and pass away no longer have the ability to displace the meditation object as the primary focus of attention; and when strong dullness no longer causes the meditation object to become faint and to take on hypnogogic distortions.

5. Sustaining Full-minded Awareness

The 5th stage is characterized by freedom from strong dullness, and by the presence of subtle distractions that are now easily kept from becoming gross distractions that overwhelm the attention to the meditation object.

The primary problem at this stage is subtle dullness that tends to diminish the vividness and intensity of perception the meditation object, and that can create a comfortable pleasantness and a misjudgment of one's meditative achievements.

A powerful and continuous *introspective awareness* is cultivated, alerting the meditator to any loss of vividness and intensity of perception of the meditation object. What this means is that the activity which the mind is engaged in is continuously monitored with an awareness of the relative degree of dullness or intensity that characterizes it. The goal of the practice in this stage is to overcome the tendency for increased dullness during the course of a meditation session, and in fact to increase the level of *full-minded awareness*. There are various techniques that can be used to achieve this goal.

The mastery of this stage is in the ability to *sustain* the intensity of full-minded awareness, not in achieving any particular level of awareness that is some sort of final objective. The degree of full-minded awareness will continue to improve in subsequent stages of practice, and one just continues to hold the intention to do so. When the meditator, having succeeded in settling the attention firmly upon the meditation object and overcoming gross distractions, is then able to sustain a high level of mindful awareness without slipping into dullness for the remainder of the session, then mastery has been achieved.

6. Subduing Subtle Distraction

This stage is characterized by stable attention to and vivid perception of the meditation object. There is a continuous stream of thoughts and sensations in the periphery of conscious awareness that have the potential to draw the attention away, and it is the sustained close attention to the meditation object that keeps them from doing so.

Because there is a continued background awareness of sensations and thoughts, *exclusive focus*, what can also be called *single-pointedness* of attention, has not yet been achieved. The meditator is now ready to bring attention to a new level of single-pointedness by restricting conscious awareness more exclusively to the meditation object.

The goal is to engage the attention with the meditation object with a sufficient degree of focus such that other thoughts and sensations are *excluded* from awareness. There are specific techniques that can be used to achieve this goal. The way in which the meditation object is perceived usually undergoes a significant transformation at this point as well in that it becomes relatively *non-conceptual*.

Upon mastery of the sixth stage, there is a virtual but not total absence of subtle distractions. The awareness of thoughts, ambient sounds, bodily sensations, and internal mental states, is only *intermittently* present, and without the power to draw the attention away from the meditation object.

7. Exclusive Focus on the Meditation Object and Pacifying the Mind

This stage is characterized by the ability to direct and sustain the attention on the meditation object, to attend *exclusively* (single-pointedly) to the object, and to investigate that object with whatever degree of narrowness or breadth of focus one chooses.

An initial effort is required in each meditation session to achieve this degree of focused attention and vivid awareness. Subtle distractions and subtle dullness can still arise and degrade the quality of attention and awareness, and so once achieved, *vigilance and effort* are required to sustain it.

The goal is for the mind to become so habituated to *non-distractability* and *full-minded awareness* that effort is no longer required to sustain it. Repeatedly sustaining the mind in this state through effort is the training that culminates in effortlessness. There is a ‘dryness’ to this stage of the practice. The continued vigilance and effort in preventing dullness and distraction becomes tedious after a while. ‘Striving for effortlessness’ is not a motivational type of activity, and it provides little basis for measurable progress and sense of satisfaction. *Diligence* in practice is very important at this stage.

Mastery has been achieved when effort is no longer required to sustain attention and awareness. Because the habit of guarding against dullness and distraction has become so strong, it can be difficult to recognize when effort is no longer required. When the meditator discovers that effort is no longer required and therefore ceases to exert effort, the mind attains to an unprecedented level of calm.

8. The Compliant Mind and Pacifying the Senses

This stage is characterized by *effortless stability of attention* with continuity and exclusive focus, and *full-minded awareness with vivid intensity and clarity*. The attention can be shifted from one object to another without disturbing the quality of concentration and awareness. This constitutes a unique condition of *mental pliancy* only arrived at through dedicated practice.

The intermittent intrusion of sensations, discursive thoughts, and mental states into conscious awareness provides evidence that the five physical senses and the ‘mind sense’ continue to function normally. Unusual sensory phenomena begin to occur with greater and greater frequency as the senses themselves begin to enter into a condition of quiescence.

The goal of this stage is the *pacification of the senses* such that the intrusion of external stimuli is greatly diminished, and the unusual sensory phenomena peculiar to this stage cease to be of a disturbing nature. The

body becomes as compliant as the mind, no longer producing distractions related to physical pain and discomfort during prolonged sitting. This process occurs naturally in this stage of the practice if the proper conditions exist.

Mastery of this stage has been achieved when the ears perceive only an inner sound, when the eyes perceive only an inner light, when the body becomes suffused with a sense of comfort and pleasure and is completely free of discomfort, and the mental state is one of joyful happiness. The meditator can literally sit for hours without physical discomfort, dullness, or distraction.

9. Physical Pliancy and Meditative Joy

This stage is characterized by *mental and physical pliancy, physical pleasure*, and a *joyful state of mind*.

There is a mental excitation associated with this stage that is distracting. This excitement can even make it difficult to concentrate well enough to achieve the state of mental and physical pliancy on anything remotely resembling a consistent basis. The meditator may also mistake the meditative joy, the experience of illumination, and the transformed perception of the body as indications of more exalted spiritual attainments.

The goal of this stage is to become so familiar with the condition of mental and physical pliancy, and the joyfulness and pleasure and altered perceptions that are its concomitants, that the initial excitement subsides and is replaced by calmness and tranquility.

When the meditator can consistently invoke mental and physical pliancy in meditation, and when these pliancies are accompanied by a profound and imperturbable tranquility, the 9th stage has been mastered.

10. Imperturbability Persisting Beyond the Sitting Practice

This final stage is characterized by imperturbable calm, joy and happiness, by highly focused attention that can be freely directed from object to object, and a greatly heightened awareness of whatever is investigated.

At first these qualities fade each time after arising from sitting practice. As time passes and practice continues, these qualities persist for longer and longer periods after the meditation ends, until they become the normal condition for the meditator. The experience of strong desire is noticeably attenuated. Negative mental reactions to events rarely occurs, and anger and ill-will virtually disappear. Others will observe this meditator to be generally happy and easily pleased, easygoing and very agreeable, non-competitive and uninterested in conflict, and perhaps even somewhat

passive. She will be relatively immune to disturbing events, and will not even be bothered much by physical pain.

Unfortunately, this meditator is not actually free from the mental afflictions of desire and ill-will and the suffering they engender. They are only held temporarily in abeyance by the fruits of this practice. Any interruption in practice, and the inevitable effects of time on the body and circumstances on the mind will demonstrate that she is still subject to suffering and the causes of suffering. Fortunately though, this meditator is now in the perfect condition to pursue profound insights into the true nature of her reality, and so may achieve a liberation that *is not* subject to passing.

A practitioner who has mastered the 8th stage or beyond will sit down and begin to follow and count the breaths. After a few breaths, she may see that there is no breath, only a series of sensations that the mind interprets as the breath, and by the end of the counting is observing them with effortless continuity and focus. This *ease of attainment* of effortless stability is itself sometimes regarded as constituting a stage of progress, but while it is clearly evidence of mastery, it is not in and of itself necessary for subsequent meditative progress, so it is not included as a separate stage here.

A practitioner who has mastered the 10th stage will, even before they sit down, still be enjoying some degree of stability of attention, intensity and clarity of awareness, and a peaceful state of joy and happiness that has been with them since their last meditation. Within a few breaths they will experience an intensification of the qualities that characterize 8th and 9th stages.

Please keep in mind during the following discussion of these 10 stages that they represent *levels of mastery*. The occasional, periodic, or even frequent occurrence of a meditative experience corresponding to any of these stages, including the more advanced stages, is a common occurrence and is not the point. The point is mastery such that the particular stage that has been mastered is arrived at *easily and consistently*. It is not unusual for a beginning meditator to have a meditation experience that recognizably corresponds to stage 4 or even 7, but it is not repeatable, so is therefore without significance *except* that it makes the meditator aware of what they are capable of. Likewise, more experienced meditators who have not actually mastered a stage beyond 3 or 4 may have occasional experiences corresponding to stage 8 or 9 whenever their minds are particularly calm and focused. This usually creates great excitement and may lead the meditator to overestimate their accomplishment, so then they will tend to pursue a repetition of that experience rather than continuing to work towards mastery of the stage they are at. In other words, isolated experiences corresponding to any of these stages can occur in any order at any time, but consistency and accomplishment based on skill rather than chance is the hallmark of real progress.

Most typically a meditator will find themselves working with several of these stages at once, moving back and forth between them, both during a single session and over many sessions over days or weeks. As an example, a practitioner at stage 3 will be doing stage 4 practice during longer and more stable periods of uninterrupted attention to the meditation object. Stage 4 practitioners will do stage 5 and stage 6 work during periods of little dullness or distraction. The work is very similar in stages 5 and 6, and the distinction between them is in terms of their specific goals. And so on. But once mastery has been achieved of any given stage, the focus then moves on to the stages yet remaining.

It is not unusual for a meditator who is living a householder's lifestyle to experience setbacks to a much earlier stage in the process. Being fired from their job, the death of a spouse, or having their teenage daughter kidnapped may be dealt with much more effectively by an advanced meditator, but they should also expect to find themselves back at the very earliest stages of practice for a while. And of course even lesser traumas than these will have a great impact as well. This just serves to remind us that these meditative accomplishments are dependent upon conditions and are vulnerable to worldly events,

Even without the influence of external events, it is not unusual for an experienced meditator to find themselves in a practice experience corresponding to one of the earlier stages of the training. For example, a meditator who has mastered through to the 9th or 10th stage may find themselves on occasion experiencing strong dullness and/or gross distraction. When this occurs they will recognize it for what it is, take the appropriate actions, and it will take care of itself.

In general, mastery of one stage is the prerequisite for mastery of the stage that follows. So in terms of mastery, the stages pretty well always occur in this order. One exception to this is that stage 5 can be skipped altogether, which as I have already explained, is a serious error leading to concentration with dullness. If this happens, the meditator may experience a shallow facsimile of the later stages, but it truly is a dead end.

I will also say something about the time required to progress through and master these stages. Contrary to what is often either implied or overtly stated in modern meditation literature, mastery through to the 10th stage need not take many years or decades to complete, nor are extended meditation retreats required. When I first began to try to teach others what I had learned about meditation, I believed that most people who practiced diligently should be able to master all ten stages in less than a year. I have since learned that not only is that not realistic in terms of *most* people, but such statements can be frustrating and discouraging for those who have been practicing seriously for much longer than that and have still not been able to attain that degree of mastery. On the other hand, there are people who have advanced through all ten stages in less than a year, using the methods described here, and more who have done so in three years or less - *based on a*

daily practice of sitting 1 to 2 hours per day plus some of the ancillary practices will suggest here, and without extended meditation retreats. So I do believe that it is possible for some to succeed in a few months of regular daily meditation with occasional longer periods of practice, and that many more will succeed with a few years of diligent practice.

There are several factors that will determine the rate of one's progress, some of which the meditator has control over and some they don't. To begin with, different people do have different natural propensities, kammic predispositions if you will, for concentration and awareness, and likewise some lifestyles and career paths are more conducive to developing concentration and awareness. These differences between individuals are further magnified by the fact that someone who is inherently inclined to be able to concentrate well is more likely to pursue interests and activities where that talent is most helpful. And those activities in turn strongly develop those same concentration abilities. So there are obviously going to be considerable differences among people from the very outset of their embarking upon a path of meditation.

There is also a great degree of variation amongst people in terms of their ability to discipline themselves to practice rigorously, and in how easily they become discouraged. The amount of time it takes to achieve mastery of the very 1st stage, that of establishing a practice, will have an enormous influence on how long it takes to achieve mastery of the other stages, and not all practitioners start out equal in their ability to master that 1st stage. When I blithely assumed that most people could advance through all or most of these stages in less than a year, I did not fully appreciate this point, and so I mistakenly assumed that the starting point of the process would be what I am now calling the 2nd stage. Something I have discovered since I began teaching meditation is how many people *go through the motions of meditating* for years, both in retreats and in daily practice, while most of their time sitting has actually been spent thinking, planning, daydreaming, fantasizing, or just sitting in a stupor.

But once one has established a practice characterized by regularity and diligence, the most important factors influencing their rate of progress will be a clear understanding of the natural order of development of the mental faculties that are being cultivated, and knowledge of some simple methods that can overcome obstacles to progress through finesse rather than through brute force. You can't run before you walk, and likewise you have to develop continuity of attention before one-pointedness, actively engaged attention before non-conceptual observation, and control of attention before pacification of the senses. Unfortunately, many meditators have greatly impeded their own progress by trying to do triple-axels before they have learned to skate, and it is largely a fault of the instruction they have received. And just as a scalpel can sometimes be more effective than a hammer, skilled application and positive reinforcement of the natural tendencies of the mind can be far more effective in overcoming dullness and distractibility than blind perseverance and stubborn persistence in attempting to subjugate the

mind. I sincerely hope to be able to clarify these matters in a way that will allow sincere practitioners to achieve success in months to a few years, rather than decades. If the meditator clearly understands the stages in cultivation of concentration and awareness, and why they must develop in the order they do, they will save themselves hundreds if not thousands of hours of futile effort.

And then there are the aforementioned life factors and stressful life events that tend to disrupt whatever progress has been made, and send us back to start over again at some earlier stage. To some degree almost everything that happens outside of meditation *potentially* has that effect. And this can be a major factor in determining how long it takes to achieve mastery of the highest level. There is a common tendency to separate meditation practice from the rest of one's life. But if everything that is learned, and all of the skills that are acquired while sitting are not continued and applied throughout the rest of the day after one arises from the cushion, it is like filling a bathtub without putting the plug in place and then walking away. By the time one returns, the tub will be almost empty again and the filling process can go on forever. I believe this is why there is such a widespread belief that long retreats are so necessary and are the only way to make real progress. But without extending and sustaining all of the elements of the practice in the remainder of one's life, even those retreats are like filling up an even larger bathtub with no plug, and then walking away again. While some semblance of progress may be achieved by spending longer periods of time filling the larger tub and shorter periods of time away, it is vastly more effective to just put in the plug! Extended retreats are wonderful, and can greatly enhance one's progress, but their greatest value can only be realized if the heart of the practice permeates every aspect of the meditator's life. Because I believe this so strongly, I have incorporated certain ancillary non-sitting practices into this description that can help the meditator to do just that.