

THE STAGES OF MEDITATION

"Mindfulness of in-and-out breathing, when developed and pursued, is of great fruit, of great benefit. Mindfulness of in-and-out breathing, when developed and pursued, brings the four applications of mindfulness to their culmination. The four applications of mindfulness, when developed and pursued, bring the seven factors for awakening to their culmination. The seven factors for awakening, when developed and pursued, bring clear knowing and release to their culmination.

"Now how is mindfulness of in-and-out breathing developed & pursued so as to be of great fruit, of great benefit?"

The Anapanasatti Sutta

In the Anapanasatti Sutta, the Buddha describes, in a series of verses, a progressive method for the development of the practice of mindfulness of in-and-out breathing. Approximately 1200 years later, the eighth century meditation master Kamalasila elaborated on the Buddha's original teaching by presenting the same process in the form of nine distinct stages. The method that will be presented here adds considerably more detail than is to be found in either the Buddha's Anapanasati Sutta or in Kamalasila's Bhavanakrama while closely adhering to both. This step-by-step process is the easiest and most effective method ever taught for successfully mastering the skills of meditation and achieving the highest goals of the practice, and it is universally applicable across the broad range of different meditation styles and techniques. The training in meditation is divided here into ten distinct stages, with the addition of Establishing A Practice as a first stage not originally included in the nine stages of Master Kamalasila. Each of these stages is defined in such a way that they can be easily identified and used by the meditator as a measure of their progress. By identifying which of these stages he or she is at, the meditator can then determine which simple techniques are most appropriately employed for continued progress into the next stage.

THE FOUR MILESTONES AND TEN STAGES IN THE PROGRESS OF MEDITATIVE TRAINING

Within these ten stages there are four major achievement levels that serve as significant milestones for marking the overall progress in development of these skills. Although these four milestones are identified primarily in terms of progress in the development of concentration, similar progress in the development of full-minded awareness takes 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**. This will produce very pleasurable meditative states that are dead-ends in themselves, leaving the meditator without the capacity for full-minded awareness necessary for completing the 10 stages of this method.

The four milestone achievements:

1. Uninterrupted continuity of attention to the meditation object

Uninterrupted continuity of attention marks the first stage of development of Skilled Concentration. The meditator is no longer a novice, prone to mind-wandering and falling asleep.

2. Sustained single-pointed attention to the meditation object, with exclusive focus

Sustained single-pointed attention constitutes the mastery of Skilled Concentration.

3. Effortless stability of the attention, also known as mental pliancy, the compliant mind

The achievement of effortlessly sustained single-pointed attention marks the first stage of development of the Concentration of an Adept

4. Stability of attention and mindful awareness are fully developed, accompanied by meditative joy, tranquility and equanimity, qualities which persist between meditation sessions

This is the Concentration of an Adept.

The 10 stages in the progress of meditative training:

"Here, monks, a monk goes to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty place, sits down, folds his legs crosswise, keeps his body erect, and brings mindful awareness to the fore. With mindful awareness, he breathes in, with mindful awareness he breathes out."

The Anapanasatti Sutta

1. Establishing a Practice.

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

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

These problems are overcome through a frequent deliberate review of one's purpose in meditating in order to generate 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 it is absolutely unavoidable, and when the meditator rarely if ever indulges in procrastinatory 'time-passing' activities while waiting for their practice time to end.

"Breathing in a long breath, he knows he breathes in a long breath, breathing out a long breath, he knows he breathes out a long breath."

"Breathing in a short breath, he knows he breathes in a short breath, breathing out a short breath, he knows he breathes out a short breath."

The Anapanasatti Sutta

2. Interrupted Continuity of Attention to the Meditation Object

The 2nd, 3rd and 4th stages are all defined in terms of the amount of time spent in mind wandering during a meditation session versus continuous attention to the meditation object. The 2nd stage is characterized by long periods of mind wandering compared with relatively short periods of attention to the meditation object.

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

To overcome this, one trains in ***introspective awareness*** so that one can notice more quickly 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 the meditation object through purposeful investigation of it.

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 noticeably longer than the time that it has been forgotten, and when the typical period of sustained attention lasts minutes while the periods of mind-wandering last only seconds, then the 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 sleepiness and dozing off. So there is still the problem of mind wandering and now there is also 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

Uninterrupted continuity of attention constitutes both the 4th stage in the progress and the first of the four major milestones mentioned above. Although this stage is characterized by **uninterrupted continuity** of attention to the meditation object, there is not yet **exclusive attention** to the meditation object, and so there are many other distractions present in the awareness at the same time. Sometimes these other thoughts and sensations come to be even more prominent in the awareness than the meditation object itself, and when this occurs they can be properly described as **gross distractions**. Then, whenever the mind ceases to be agitated, it tends to slip into **strong dullness**

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

Invoking **introspective awareness** becomes a habit, and introspective awareness is what 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 by this time it has 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.

With the completion of the fourth stage, the meditator can clearly discern whether each breath is longer or shorter than those that have preceded it

"Experiencing the whole body while breathing in, he trains himself. Experiencing the whole body while breathing out, he trains himself."

The Anapanasatti Sutta

5. Sustaining Full-minded Awareness

The fifth stage is characterized by freedom from strong dullness, and by the ability to easily keep the subtle distractions that continue to be present from becoming gross distractions that will overwhelm the attention to the meditation object.

The primary problem to be dealt with at this stage is the subtle dullness that tends to diminish the vividness and intensity of perception of 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 vividness that characterizes it. The goal of the practice in this stage is for the meditator to overcome the tendency for an increase in dullness during the course of a meditation session, and instead to be able to actually increase the level of **fully conscious mindful awareness** during the course of a session. Experiencing the Whole Body with the Breath is a specific technique that can be used to achieve this goal.

The mastery of this stage lies 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 the practice, and the meditator 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 of the fifth stage 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 only 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 his or her attention to a new level of single-pointedness in which conscious awareness is more exclusively restricted to the meditation object.

The goal is to engage the attention with the meditation object with sufficient attentional stability that all other thoughts and sensations that happen to enter the field of awareness can be ignored, so in effect they are **excluded** from conscious attention. Mental self-talk and narrative fade progressively in this stage of the practice, and whatever verbal murmurings that take place in the background of the awareness become much easier to disregard. Discursive thought processes become less and less apparent, although if the acuity of introspective awareness is great enough, the meditator can still detect their presence somewhere 'below the surface' of conscious awareness. Experiencing the Whole Body with the Breath is a specific technique 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. Exclusive focus can be said to have been attained.

"Calming the body formations while breathing in, he trains himself. Calming the body formations while breathing out, he trains himself."

The Anapanasatti Sutta

7. Single-Pointed Attention to 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. The latter is an important point to understand. Single-pointedness refers not to how tightly focused the attention is, not to the 'smallness' of the object or scope of attention, but rather to the unwavering stability of the focus which is accomplished by excluding potential distractions. Thus, for example, one can attend just as single-pointedly to the sensations of the body as a whole as to the sensations in a tiny area at the tip of the nose. Consistent experience of exclusive, single-pointed focus of attention is the second of the four major milestones in the development of one's practice. Uninterrupted continuity and exclusive focus of attention constitute the concentration level of a truly **skilled** practitioner.

An initial effort is still 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 of the practice in this stage is for the mind to become so thoroughly 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 sometimes a 'dryness' to this stage of the practice that will disappear in the next. The continued vigilance and effort required to prevent dullness and distraction from reappearing 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. In addition to or sometimes instead of the dry tediousness, there are often bizarre and strongly distracting sensations and bodily movements that occur in this stage. There can be intermittent periods of joy and happiness as well. **Diligence** in practice is very important at this stage, as the meditator can be quite vulnerable at some times to boredom and restlessness, and to fascination with unusual experiences at others.

Mastery has been achieved when effort is no longer required to sustain attention and mindful awareness. The meditator finds the attention can be readily shifted from one object to another without disturbing the quality of concentration and awareness. This quality of effortlessness is called mental pliancy, the mind has been tamed and can now be described as compliant.

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 an unprecedented level of calm.

"Experiencing meditative joy while breathing in, he trains himself. Experiencing meditative joy while breathing out, he trains himself.

"Experiencing pleasure while breathing in, he trains himself. Experiencing pleasure while breathing out, he trains himself."

The Anapanasatti Sutta

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**. This constitutes a unique condition of **mental pliancy** only arrived at through dedicated practice, and it is the third of the four milestone achievements in practice development. With the achievement of mental pliancy, the meditator can now be considered an **adept** practitioner. Mental pliancy is accompanied by meditative joy, a pleasurable feeling in the body, and joyful happiness.

The mind at this stage is described as being 'malleable' and 'wieldy'. Something is said to be malleable when it can be readily shaped or formed to our wishes. One has malleability of mind when the attention rests stably upon whatever object it has been directed towards, and when the quality of awareness stays bright and sharp without sinking into dullness. The sense in which the mind is wieldy is that the attention is freely moveable and can be easily shifted from one object to another without losing stability, just as a 'wieldy' object can be easily moved about. Another manifestation of 'wieldiness of mind' is that the attention can rest in a simple, open state of observation,

noticing whatever happens to enter the field of awareness without 'sticking to it' or becoming 'caught' by whatever comes along.

The compliant mind is also called the **superior mind**. It is a state in which the mind exercises great powers of full-minded awareness of whatever it attends to and introspective awareness of its own state and activities. The superior mind is one that performs its functions of cognition, understanding, and evaluation in the most effective possible way.

The occasional intrusion of sensations, discursive thoughts, and mental states into conscious awareness provide clear evidence that the five physical senses and the 'mind sense' continue to function normally. Unusual sensory phenomena occur with great frequency as the senses themselves begin to enter into a condition of quiescence.

The goal of this stage is the complete **pacification of the six senses** such that the intrusion of external stimuli is even further diminished, and the unusual sensory phenomena that are 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 (except when there is a particularly loud or unusual external sound), when the eyes perceive only an inner light (unless the eyelids are opened), when the body becomes suffused with a sense of comfort and pleasure and is completely free of discomfort, and the mental state tends towards joyfulness. The meditator can literally sit for hours without physical discomfort, dullness, or distraction. This is called physical pliancy, and follows naturally upon mental pliancy when the proper conditions have been created.

*"Experiencing [meditative joy and happiness as] mental formations while breathing in, he trains himself.
Experiencing [meditative joy and happiness as] mental formations while breathing out, he trains himself."*

"Calming the mental formations while breathing in, he trains himself. Calming the mental formations while breathing out, he trains himself."

9. Physical Pliancy and Meditative Joy

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

There is such a strong feeling of joyfulness associated with this stage that it creates a mental excitation that is distracting. This excitement, and the desire for and anticipation of this state, can even make it difficult for the meditator to concentrate well enough to achieve the state of mental and physical pliancy on a very 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, and so interrupt the continued development of their practice.

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

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

"Experiencing the mind while breathing in, he trains himself. Experiencing the mind while breathing out, he trains himself.

"Delighting the mind glad while breathing in, he trains himself. Delighting the mind while breathing out, he trains himself.

"Making the mind tranquil and fresh while breathing in, he trains himself. Making the mind tranquil and fresh while breathing out, he trains himself.

"Liberating the mind while breathing in, he trains himself. Liberating the mind while breathing out, he trains himself."

The Anapanasatti Sutta

10. Stability of Attention and Awareness Persisting Beyond the Sitting Practice

This final stage is, of course, the last great milestone achievement of this process. It possesses the same characteristics of mental and physical pliancy as the preceding stages, combined with an almost imperturbable peacefulness and calm, joy and happiness, and profound equanimity.

At first these qualities begin to fade each time not long after arising from the sitting practice. But as practice continues, they persist for longer and longer periods after each meditation session ends, until before too long they become the normal condition for the meditator. The experience of strong desire is noticeably attenuated. Negative mental reactions to events rarely occur, 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. He or she will be relatively immune to disturbing events, and will not even be particularly bothered by physical pain.

The mind of the meditator at this 10th stage of development is also known as the '**unsurpassable**' or '**unexcelled**' mind. Because the state of powerful concentration, fully conscious awareness, joyfulness, tranquility and equanimity has not completely disappeared between sessions, the meditator regains the fully developed meditative state immediately upon sitting down to practice again. There is no need to go through any intermediate stages. Because all of these factors are present between meditation sessions, the meditator is capable of practicing the Four Applications of Mindfulness in daily life with amazing effectiveness.

Unfortunately, this meditator is not yet permanently 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 prolonged interruption in practice, and the inevitable effects of time on the body and circumstances on the mind, will demonstrate that they are still subject to suffering and the causes of suffering. Fortunately though, this meditator is also now in the ideal mental condition to quickly achieve the most profound insights into the true nature of their personal reality, and so may achieve a liberation that *is not* subject to passing.

What is most important here is that this '**unsurpassable mind**' with its qualities of concentration, mindful awareness, joy, tranquility and

equanimity is a mind at the threshold of, and therefore has immediate access to, two other most unique and important mental states – the meditative absorptions, known as *Jhanas*; and the liberating experience of Ultimate Reality, known as *Nibbana*.

An Overview of the Process

A practitioner who has mastered the eighth 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 separate stage of meditative progress, but while it provides clear evidence of mastery, since it is not in and of itself a necessary condition for subsequent meditative progress, it has not been included as a separate stage here, but rather is indicated as a characteristic typical of all of the advanced stages, eight through ten.

A practitioner who has mastered the tenth 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 the full development of the mental state that characterizes this stage.

Please keep in mind during the 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 even 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.

For example, a meditator may experience a period in which verbal self-talk ceases and it seems there is no discursive thought taking place at all, even at subtle levels. This is wonderful and exciting, but it has no significance at all if it is an isolated event arising spontaneously. It only becomes significant when the meditator understands exactly what the conditions are that need to be present for the inner narrative and discursive thought to disappear, and can consistently reproduce those conditions. Even being able to consistently enter into that state is of little significance if the meditator has not yet mastered the mind's tendency to be drawn towards subtle distractions that arise. The greatest and most rapid success in practice is the result of systematically overcoming the various problems of forgetting and mind-wandering, gross and subtle distractions and strong and subtle dullness in their proper order. Then non-verbal, non-discursive, and non-conceptual mind will arise naturally as a part of the skill of maintaining exclusive focus of attention.

Not infrequently, a meditator in the early stages of concentration development will have brief experiences of meditative joy and/ or bodily pleasure of the type that is characteristic of the 8th and 9th stages. This can mislead them in such a way that they neglect the development of the skills appropriate to their current level of progress. In other words, isolated experiences corresponding to any of these meditation stages can occur in any order at any time, but consistency and accomplishment that is based on skill rather than chance is the hallmark of genuine progress.

Unfortunately, any description of the developmental progression of the practice is going to sound much more linear than it really is. Most typically a meditator will find themselves working with several of these stages at once, moving back and forth between them, over a period of days or weeks, and even during a single session. As an example, a practitioner who we would say is at stage 3, based on the fact that their meditations are usually interrupted by periods of mind wandering of relatively short duration, may have occasional sessions where they don't lose awareness of the meditation object at all (stage 4), while at other times their minds are so agitated that mind wandering dominates the whole session (stage 2). This is normal, and all meditators can expect to have days when they seem to have jumped to a more advanced skill level, and others when they seem to have regressed to a stage they thought had been left behind some time ago.

Another way in which the progress is not all that linear is that the meditator will be doing the practices and working on the problems

specific to several of the developmental stages at the same time. It is obvious, of course, that a beginner will be doing stage 2 practice while they are working on establishing the regularity and consistency of practice that define stage 1. Likewise, whenever a meditator in stage 2 or 3 enjoys longer and more stable periods of uninterrupted attention to the meditation object, they will be doing the practice at a stage 4 level. Part of the practice at stage 3 for overcoming the short periods of mind wandering that still arise is identical with the practice for overcoming gross distractions at stage 4. Stage 4 practitioners will do stage 5 and stage 6 training during periods of little dullness or distraction. The methods employed are very similar in stages 5 and 6, and the distinction between them is more in terms of their specific goals. And so on. But once mastery has been achieved for any given stage, the focus of the practice as a whole then moves on to the stages yet remaining. Since it happens in this way, the rate of advancement through subsequent stages tends to accelerate. Though it might seem to take a long time to completely overcome mind wandering and enter stage 4, because so much of the training appropriate to that stage has already been taking place, the meditator will be able to move much more quickly from stage 4 to stage 5 than they could from stage 3 to stage 4, and that same acceleration continues in the later stages.

The secret for making the most rapid progress is doing the practice that is most appropriate for whatever is happening in the meditation at the time, and not getting ahead of oneself. Being concerned with trying to be single-pointed (stage 6 practice) before mind-wandering has been overcome (stage 4) will actually impede one in overcoming mind wandering and create the conditions for frustration and disappointment to arise. Trying to overcome subtle dullness (stage 5 practice) while gross distractions are still present in stage 4 will be to deny oneself one of the tools for subduing those distractions.

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 from time to time. Being fired from their job, the death of a spouse, or having a teenage daughter run away from home 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 ninth or tenth 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 is truly at a dead end as far as attaining the real fruits of meditation practice.

The attitude with which we approach meditation is very important. When we use terms like 'achieve', 'attain', and 'mastery', it easily feeds into the natural inclination we all have to think of ourselves as the 'doer' of deeds, and to feel that we are somehow responsible for producing results through effort and will. There is no situation in which this view is more inappropriate than in the practice of meditation. Holding to this view will create obstacles and become a source of discouragement, so it is best to let go of it as soon as possible. What we do in this practice more than anything else is simply to create specific conditions, and then the practice will unfold on its own in a highly predictable way as a result of those conditions. It is through holding certain intentions in mind, and by performing very simple acts of attention and awareness, that we create the conditions that yield the results we want. Thus:

- By setting aside a suitable time and place, and repeatedly invoking the motivating factors that have inspired us to take up meditation, we create the conditions for establishing a regular practice (stage 1). This is far more effective than forcing ourselves to practice through self-discipline and chastisement.
- As anyone who has tried to meditate quickly discovers, we can't prevent our minds from forgetting the meditation object by willpower alone, nor can we force ourselves to become aware of it when the mind has wandered. But through developing an appreciation for the quality of self-awareness that informs us when the mind has wandered, by redirecting the attention to the meditation object, and then by remembering to engage as fully

as possible with the meditation object, we create the conditions for periods of mind-wandering to become shorter and periods of engagement with the meditation object to become longer (stage 2).

- Whenever the periods between episodes of mind-wandering are long enough, we can evoke introspective self-awareness rather than waiting for it to arise spontaneously some time after the mind has already forgotten the meditation object. By repeatedly doing so, we create the conditions for distractions to be noticed before the mind has wandered (stage 3).
- Through being vigilant in the moment and attending to the quality of our awareness, we create the conditions for overcoming every sort of dullness and distraction, and so begin to enjoy an exclusive, single-pointed focus of attention to the meditation object. (stages 4-6).
- By simply continuing to guard against dullness and distraction, the mind becomes conditioned to sustain concentration and awareness effortlessly (stage 7)
- Mental and physical pliancy, pleasure, and joy are the conditioned result of effortlessly sustained single-pointed concentration (stage 8).
- Simply abiding in the state of meditative joy creates the familiarity which is the necessary condition for profound tranquility and equanimity to arise (stage 9).

Thus it can be seen that, at every stage, the intentions and actions required by the meditator as 'doer' are extremely simple and easily accomplished in the present moment. All that is required is that we continue to repeat them, patiently and without expectation, creating the conditions that will ultimately bear the desired fruit. Like gardeners of the mind, meditators plant the seeds of *attention* and *awareness*, water them with *diligence*, remove the weeds of *distraction* and *dullness* whenever they sprout up, protecting them from the destructive pests of *procrastination*, *doubt*, *desire*, *aversion*, and *agitation*. Everything else comes of its own accord in due time. Patience and trust in the process will lead to quicker success than will impatience and effortful striving. Will a seed sprout more quickly if, due to impatience and frustration, you keep digging it up and replanting it? That is similar to allowing frustration to interrupt the regularity of your practice, or looking for a 'better' or 'easier' practice,

or greeting each instance of mind-wandering or sleepiness with impatience and annoyance. Weeds need to be plucked out one at a time, with patience, as they arise. Agitating the mind with impatience is just like tearing up the garden. Concentration and awareness can no more be forced than a sapling can be forced to grow longer by stretching it. Chasing after physical pliancy and meditative joy is like trying to force a bud to become a flower by pulling it open.

How Long Will It Take?

Something needs to be said 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 tenth stage need not take many years or decades to complete, nor are extended meditation retreats an absolute requirement. When I first began teaching 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 was that totally unrealistic in terms of *most* people, but to make such statements at all can cause frustration and discouragement for those who have been practicing seriously for longer than that and still have not attained that degree of mastery. On the other hand, there really are people who have advanced through all ten stages in less than a year, using the methods described here, and others who have done so in three years or less - *based on a regular daily sitting practice of 1 to 2 hours per day plus some of the ancillary practices suggested here, and supplemented by shorter or longer meditation retreats, but without extended retreats lasting for months or years.* So please be assured that it is possible for at least some householders to succeed within a few months or years of regular, diligent daily meditation with occasional longer periods of practice.

There are several factors that will determine the rate of one's progress, some of which the meditator has some influence over, and some they do not. To begin with, different people do have different natural propensities, karmic 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 natural 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 also in how easily they become discouraged. The amount of time it takes to achieve mastery of the very first 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 first 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 referring to as the second 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. In fact, 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 that is 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 *fitness* rather than through brute force. You can't run before you walk, and likewise you have to develop continuity of attention before single-pointedness, actively engaged attention before non-conceptual observation, and control of attention before pacification of the senses. Unfortunately, many meditators have greatly impaired their own progress by trying to do the equivalent of triple-axels before they have learned to skate. 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 points in a way that will allow sincere practitioners to achieve success in a few 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 just 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, i.e. longer and more frequent retreats, 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. There are certain important ancillary non-sitting practices that will be discussed that can help the meditator to do just that.