

The Noble Eightfold Path

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"I teach one thing: Suffering and its end." -- The Buddha

Introduction

The Eightfold Path is the fourth of the Buddha's Noble Truths, and he described it as the way that leads to the uprooting of the causes of suffering, and thus to increasingly stable and profound peacefulness, wisdom, virtue, and happiness.

Each of the eight elements of this Path is described by a word that is typically translated as "right" or "wise." Both meanings are useful to reflect upon regarding your own suffering and your yearning for its end. Each element of the Path is right, in the sense of being correct, moral, and a pointed instruction about how to live. Each element is also wise, in the sense of resulting from deep understanding and leading to good results. In keeping with the weight of tradition and the value of the sharp edge of the word, "right," that's what is used in this summary.

While the eight elements of the Path are presented here in their traditional sequence, they are not something you develop in order. They are all important, all the time. Yet some may become more prominent aspects of your practice at one time or another.

The heart of each element of the Path is **non-clinging**, the essence of the Third Noble Truth: the cause of the end of suffering.

[Note: Quotations are shown in italics, and in some cases have been edited for brevity, clarity, including female pronouns, etc. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from the Buddha are from Bhikkhu Bodhi's anthology, *In the Buddha's Words*, shown as BW with page number(s).]

Right View

Introduction

Right View entails a deep, embodied understanding of the truth of things -- in particular, the truth of the three topics discussed just below.

One who has fully developed right view is considered a "stream-enterer," one who is certain of ultimate liberation."

The Four Noble Truths

The Buddha: *"And what, monks, is right view? Knowledge of suffering, knowledge of the origin of suffering, knowledge of the cessation of suffering, knowledge of the way leading to the cessation of suffering."*

Please see the article on "The Four Noble Truths" in the Buddhist Wisdom section of this webpage: <http://www.wisebrain.org/articles.html>.

The Unwholesome and the Wholesome

Right view also entails understanding what is unwholesome and avoiding it, and understanding what is wholesome and doing it.

What did the Buddha say were the causes of the unwholesome? They are any and all forms of greed, hatred, delusion, and the belief in a separate self.

What did the Buddha say were the causes of the wholesome? They are equanimity and renunciation, compassion and lovingkindness, wisdom, and releasing the "conceit" of self.

You might like to consider the causes of the wholesome and unwholesome as they occur in your own mind and life. For example, you could take a day or a week and investigate one cause in particular, such as all the manifestations of greed in your mind - or alternately, all the manifestations of compassion.

The Chain of Dependent Origination

Last, right view means understanding what the Buddha called "the chain of dependent origination."

In its essence, this means simply understanding that everything is the result of causes, a restatement of the law of karma. In personal terms, this means that if you foster certain causes in your life, good things will result for you and others; on the other hand, if you foster other causes, bad things will result. Wisdom is knowing which is which!

In the formal, detailed statement of the chain of dependent origination, the Buddha gave a complex, circular, intertwining, and sometimes mind-boggling description of why things are the way they are. This description can be daunting at first glance. Take your time with it, and learn more about what the specific terms mean that the Buddha uses. Its depth and power will become clearer for you, and probably very useful. This is the chain, with thirteen links:

- "Taints" (sensual desire, ignorance, and sheer existence) lead to:
- Ignorance (not realizing the Four Noble Truths; presuming a separate self), leading to:
- "Volitional formations" (wholesome and unwholesome intentions expressed through the body, speech, or mind), leading to:
- Consciousness (linked to the five bodily senses and the mind), leading to:

- "Name-and-form" (the cognitive and physical aspects of individual existence), leading to:
 - The six sense bases (sight, touch, mind, etc.), leading to:
 - Contact (the meeting of three things: a sense organ, an object appropriate to that organ, and the consciousness associated with that organ; with the five senses and the mind, there are six types of contact), leading to:
 - Feeling (meaning not emotion, which is a "mental formation," but the tone of an experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral), leading to:
 - Craving (for forms, for mental phenomena, etc.), leading to:
 - Clinging (to sensual pleasures [including avoiding pain], to views, to rites and rituals, and a sense of separate self), leading to:
 - Existence (in one of the realms of Buddhist cosmology, ranging from hells to heavens), leading to:
 - Birth (through reincarnation, in one of those realms of existence), leading to:
 - Aging and death, and then carrying karmic tendencies which are:
 - Taints

There are repetitions and feedback loops within the chain of dependent origination. That means you can change your fate at many "links" within the chain. In particular:

- Reducing ignorance sends huge positive ripples through the whole system.
- If you can have equanimity toward your feeling reaction - toward whether something is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral - you can interrupt the tendency toward craving, clinging, etc.

Right Intention

Introduction

This is sometimes translated as "right resolve," which conveys the determination, firmness of aim, heartfelt conviction, and persistence that are central to right intention.

Intention of harmlessness

This is a broad aim of not causing pain, loss, or destruction to any living thing. At a minimum, this is a sweeping resolution to avoid any whit of harm to another human being. The implications are far-reaching, since most of us participate daily in activities whose requirements or ripples may involve harm to others (e.g., use of fossil fuels that warms the planet, purchasing goods manufactured in oppressive conditions). Further, in American culture there is a strong tradition of rugged individualism in which as long as you are not egregiously forceful or deceitful, "let the buyer beware" on the other side of daily transactions; but if your aim is preventing any harm, then the other person's free consent does not remove your responsibility.

Taking it a step further, to many, harmlessness means not killing bothersome insects, rodents, etc. Even as you feel the mosquito sticking its needle into your neck. And to many, harmlessness means eating a vegetarian diet (and perhaps forgoing milk products, since cows need to have calves to keep their milk production flowing, and half of those calves are male, who will eventually be slaughtered for food).

Nonetheless, we need to realize that there is no way to avoid all harms to other beings that flow inexorably through our life. If we are to eat, we must kill plants, and billions of bacteria die each day as we pass wastes out of our bodies. If we get hired for a job, that means another person will not be.

But what we can do is to have a sincere aspiration toward harmlessness, and to reduce our harms to an absolute minimum. And that makes all the difference in the world.

Intention of non-ill will

Here we give up angry, punishing reactions toward others, animals, plants, and things. If such attitudes arise, we resolve not to feed them, and to cut them off as fast as we can.

Please see the article on "Ill Will to Good Will" in the Buddhist Wisdom section of this webpage: <http://www.wisebrain.org/articles.html>.

Intention of renunciation

Renunciation is founded on a disenchantment with the world and with experience, based on right view. You see through all the possibilities of experience: you see their ephemeral, insubstantial, empty qualities, no matter how alluring or seemingly gratifying. You see the suffering embedded in the experience, the "trap," as the Buddha put it. And you see the happiness, peace, and love available in not chasing after pleasure or resisting pain.

Based on this clear seeing, you align yourself with the wisdom perspective and with the innate, prior, always already existing wakeful, pure, peaceful, and radiant awareness within yourself. In so doing, you renounce worldly things and worldly pleasures. If they pass through your awareness - a sunset, a child's smile, chocolate pudding, Beethoven's 9th - fine; just don't cling to them as they disappear as all experiences do.

Renunciation is NOT asceticism, or privation for privation's sake. It is a joyous union with the path of happiness that happens to include a relinquishing, casting off, abandoning, walking away from any seeking at all of worldly gratifications.

At its heart, renunciation is simple: we just let go. Ajahn Chah: *"If you let go a little, you will have a little happiness. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of happiness. If you let go completely, you will be completely happy."*

Right Speech

Abstinence from false speech

Do not knowingly say what is not true. But note that this does not mean you have to tell people everything. The Buddha said that whatever we say should pass three tests at a minimum, and often a fourth: Is it true? Is it useful? Is it timely? (And the fourth: Is it welcome?)

Abstinence from malicious speech

This links to the intention of non-ill will. Malice has to do with intention, but those intentions are often unconscious or fleeting. If you are about to say something but you're getting a funny feeling, you probably shouldn't say it.

Abstinence from harsh speech

"Harsh" is a matter of both content and tone. Sometimes the best course is to say something that is true, useful, and timely - even if not welcome - and the art is to say it in a clean way. Imagine a video camera is recording you and will be played back later; act in such a way that you will not squirm but will feel at peace with what you see. Or try out what you might say (or write) with others and get their feedback about harshness, including some that might just be leaking through in spite of your filters.

Abstinence from idle chatter

This probably originated as an admonition to monks and nuns, but it is also worth considering in householder life. How much of the time are we jabbering away to no

good purpose - not even our own well-being - wasting time and energy, consuming the attention of others, avoiding what's really important?

Extending these standards to thought

Much thought is internal speech: the verbal processes of the mind. Consider abstaining from false, malicious, harsh, or idle thinking!

Right Action

Introduction

These are restatements of three of the five basic precepts.

Abstinence from the destruction of life

At a minimum, this means not killing human beings through murder or through war. For example, unlike other major religions, there has never been a war in the name of the Buddha.

It is also often taken to mean (especially for monks and nuns) not eating meat from an animal that was killed specifically to feed you; on the other hand, if (hypothetically) a chicken were killed for a family's dinner and some meat was leftover and placed in a nun's begging bowl, she could eat it.

As with the intention of non-harming, the literal meaning of the abstinence from the destruction of life has far-reaching implications. Do you never eat vegetables that have been raised with pesticides? How about vegetables grown organically with pesticide control via the introduction of bugs that eat (and kill) pests? How about vegetables with no pest control at all but harvested by people who can't help but crush tiny insects as they walk about the fields wearing leather shoes? Since absolute harmlessness is impossible, the question of balance is a serious one.

Abstinence from taking what is not given

Beyond the obvious action of not stealing, it's interesting to reflect on broader notions of not taking what is not freely offered. What about glancing at a letter sitting out on another person's desk; were its contents freely offered to you? Or looking at the photo of an actress sunbathing snapped by a paparazzi; did she offer you her image voluntarily? There's \$10 lying on the sidewalk: do you pick it up?

Abstinence from sexual misconduct

Obviously, this means not engaging in infidelity, rape, molestation, or incest; for monks and nuns it goes further and includes touch, being alone with a member of the opposite sex, etc.

But there are also realms of sexuality that involve shades of gray. For example, when is sexual exploitation involved in seduction or even flirting? We often know in our bones if we are starting to cross a line in which we are using another person for our own purposes, especially if there is any element of deception - but sometimes it's not so clear. How about cajoling or pressuring our mates for sex when they'd rather go to sleep; is that misconduct.

Or consider viewing pornography. If you believe the people in the images are being exploited in some way - even if their participation is ostensibly voluntary - are you engaging in sexual misconduct if you participate in their exploitation if you buy the magazine or simply just click onto the website?

Practice is about wrestling with these questions mindfully, with a skeptical eye on the element of clinging, not robotically adhering to some fixed rule. If there is any whiff of clinging, grasping, or aversion in the action, it's probably best avoided - and this applies to each of the elements of the Eightfold Path.

Right Livelihood

Introduction

Some of the Buddha's general instructions on householder life are included here, particularly as they pertain to making a living or accumulating wealth. Obviously, many of the considerations of right livelihood and family life would not apply to monks or nuns, who are "homeless," celibate, do not handle money or own property, and never ask for payment of any kind.

Avoiding Wrong Livelihood

The Buddha talked about many of the central themes of his teaching in terms of their negation, such as impermanence, not-self, and non-clinging. He did the same in his explicit description of what constitutes right livelihood:

"These five trades should not be taken up: trading in weapons, living beings, meat, intoxicants, poisons." [BW, 126]

The Sources of Welfare and Happiness in the Present Life

Additionally, the Buddha offered guidance for how a householder should engage the world that have clear implications for right livelihood.

"Four things lead to the welfare and happiness of a family man or woman:

- *The accomplishment of persistent effort - Whatever may be the means by which a person earns a living, he or she is skillful and diligent.*

- *The accomplishment of protection - The person sets up protection and guard over the wealth acquired by energetic striving, amassed by the strength of his or her arms, earned by the sweat of his or her brow, righteous wealth righteously gained.*
- *Good friendship - Wherever one dwells, one associates with people who are of mature virtue and accomplished in faith, moral discipline, generosity, and wisdom, and converses with and emulates them.*
- *Balanced living - A person knows his or her income and expenditures and leads a balanced life, neither extravagant nor miserly, so that income exceeds expenditures rather than the reverse. Just as a goldsmith or his apprentice, holding a up a scale, knows, 'By so much it has dipped down, by so much it has tilted up,' so a family man or woman leads a balanced life." [BW, 124-125]*

"Four other things also lead to a family man's or woman's welfare and happiness in the present life: accomplishment in faith, moral discipline, generosity, and wisdom:

- *Accomplishment in faith - The person places faith in the enlightenment of the Buddha*
- *Accomplishment in moral discipline - The person keeps the five basic precepts (no killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false or harmful speech, or intoxicants leading to carelessness)*
- *Accomplishment in generosity - The person dwells at home with a mind devoid of the stain of stinginess, freely generous, open-handed, delighted in relinquishment, devoted to charity, delighting in giving and sharing.*
- *Accomplishment in wisdom - The person possesses the wisdom that sees into the arising and passing away of phenomena, that is noble and penetrative and leads to the complete destruction of suffering." [BW, 125-126]*

Note the framing of faith, morality, etc. as accomplishments, as character traits in which one can become increasingly effective, skillful, and masterful. This reflects the fundamental theme in Buddhism of a progressive process of growing skillfulness. In other words, we all have the opportunity for spiritual realization - even of the highest sort - and we are the ones who are responsible for making use of that opportunity.

The Proper Use of Wealth

"With wealth acquired by energetic striving, amassed by the strength of his or her arms, earned by the sweat of his or her brow, righteous wealth righteously gained, the noble disciple undertakes four worthy deeds:

- He makes himself happy and pleased and properly maintains himself in happiness, and he does the same for his parents, wife and children, workers and servants, and friends and colleagues.
- He makes provisions against the losses that might arise on account of fire and floods, kings and bandits and unloved heirs; he makes himself secure against them.
- He makes the five kinds of offerings: to relatives, guests, ancestors, the king, and the devas [religious spirits].
- He establishes a lofty offering of alms to those ascetics and Brahmins [noble beings] who refrain from vanity and negligence, who are settled in patience and gentleness, who are devoted to taming themselves, to calming themselves, and to attaining Nibbana - an offering that is heavenly, resulting in happiness, conducive to heaven.

For anyone whose wealth is expended on other things apart from these four worthy deeds, that wealth is said to have to waste, to have been squandered and used frivolously. But for anyone whose wealth is expended on these four worthy deeds, that wealth is said to have gone to good use, to have been fruitfully applied and used for a worthy cause." [BW 126-127]

Avoiding the Dissipation of Wealth

"Wealth has four sources of dissipation: womanizing, drunkenness, gambling, and evil friendship." [BW 125]

The Happiness of a Householder

"There are four kinds of happiness which may be achieved by a layperson who enjoys sensual pleasures, depending on time and occasion:

- The happiness of possession - When a person thinks, 'I possess wealth acquired by energetic striving, amassed by the strength of his or her arms, earned by the sweat of his or her brow, righteous wealth righteously gained,' he or she experiences happiness or joy.
- The happiness of enjoyment - When a person thinks, 'I enjoy my wealth and do meritorious deeds,' he or she experiences happiness or joy.
- The happiness of freedom from debt - When a person thinks, 'I am not indebted to anyone to any degree, whether small or great,' he or she experiences happiness or joy.
- The happiness of blamelessness - When a person thinks, 'I am endowed with blameless conduct of body, speech, and mind,' he or she experiences happiness or joy." [BW 127-128]

How to Cultivate Right Livelihood

- Mindfulness of the body - By remaining aware of the body, you can stay present with the people and the activities involved in your work.
- Not clinging to self - By relaxing attachment to "me and mine," by not getting identified with views, by seeing oneself and others as simply parts of one whole thing, then one will be more likely to be caring and moral in one's work.
- Avoiding harms to oneself and others - We typically focus on avoiding harms that have to do with outcomes, with the results of our work, and that is certainly good. Additionally, consider avoiding the harms that have to do with the process or manner of our work, such as how we represent ourselves in the world, or do business, or speak with customers or colleagues.
- Tend to the mental dimension - Note the frequent reference to blameless conduct of mind. It's relatively easy to act well in one's speech and outward behavior. But being blameless in thought or inner feeling: hmm, that is a much greater challenge - yet having a blameless mind will probably bring much greater benefit to you and others than blameless speech or behavior.
- Focus on the fundamental causes (and that's all anyone can really do):
"Buddhism teaches us to make earnest efforts in the things we do, but our actions should not be mixed with desire. They should be performed with the aim of letting go and realizing nonattachment. We do what we need to do, but with letting go. We do our work according to our responsibilities [rather than because of a wish to get something]. If we act like this, we can be at ease. . . . It's a matter of making causes. If the causes are good, the result is bound to be good. If we think like this, there will be lightness of mind. This is called right livelihood."
Ajahn Chah, Being Dharma, pps. 118-119

Right Effort

Introduction

Right Effort is one of the three elements of the Path that focus particularly on your internal states of being (the others are Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration).

Preventing and Abandoning the Negative, Cultivating and Maintaining the Positive

"And what, monks, is right effort? Here, monks, a person generates desire for the nonarising of unarisen evil unwholesome states; he or she makes an effort, arouses energy, applies his or her mind, and strives. He or she generates desire for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states . . . He or she generates desire for the arising of unarisen wholesome states He or she generates desire for the continuation of arisen wholesome states, for their nondecline, increase, expansion, and fulfillment by development; he or she makes an effort arouses energy, applies his or her mind, and strives. This is called right effort."

[BW, 239]

Unwholesome States

At root, these are conditions of greed, hatred, and delusion -- even in their subtlest forms. Such states also encompass sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt (from the Five Hindrances), and wrong view (e.g., belief in a self). These are considered "evil" because they lead to bad results for oneself and others.

Wholesome States

These include non-greed, non-hatred, etc., as well as more affirmatively described conditions of generosity, diligence, insight, wisdom, equanimity, lovingkindness, concentration, bliss, and joy.

Cultivating Your Garden

Right Effort is an ongoing, conscious, and wholehearted application of energy and attention to cultivating the garden of your mind and heart. But what helps you - or *could* help you - keep weeding and pruning, planting and fertilizing, day after day after day? Each person has their own answers, but traditionally the Buddha offered three great resources (sometimes called refuges) to help you keep at the path of Awakening:

- The Buddha - Both as a wise teacher you can have general confidence in and as a symbol of the natural wisdom and goodness we all have at the core of our being
- The Dharma - Both the teachings of Buddhism, evaluated by each person for themselves, and ultimately, reality itself with all of its mysteries
- The Sangha - Both the vertical dimension of our teachers and the horizontal dimension of fellow practitioners gathered together on the path

Right Mindfulness

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is simply a continuous, non-judgmental, accepting awareness of your inner and outer world - especially your inner one: the flow of experience. It is a very grounded awareness, not some kind of lofty mystical state.

Why Be Mindful?

Mindfulness feels good in its own right: relaxed, alert, and peaceful. Additionally, studies have shown that it lowers stress, makes discomfort and pain more bearable, reduces depression, and increases self-knowledge and self-acceptance. Mindfulness is required for the "observing ego" everyone needs for healthy functioning. It detaches you from reactions to see them with gentle clarity and perspective, helping

you change old patterns and respond more skillfully. The mindful acceptance of a difficult experience, opening to it without resistance, often allows it to move on. Mindfulness brings you into the present, the only place you can ever be truly happy and free. All this is reason enough to cultivate this quality in our lives.

Further, the Buddha described mindfulness, when fully developed, as the direct path to enlightenment and the end of suffering:

"This is the one-way path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentations, for the passing away of pain and dejection, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of Nibbana - namely, the four establishments of mindfulness.

This pure awareness - which becomes increasingly absorbed by its objects with growing concentration, to the point that there is vanishingly little difference between the observer and the observed (see the handout on Right Concentration) - is a kind of spotlight illuminating the nature of mind and reality in more and more breathtaking detail. This brings insight into the causes of suffering, and into the causes leading to the end of suffering. (In Pali - the language in which the teachings of the Buddha were first written down - the word for insight is "vipassana.")

Mindfulness is the counter to our habitual state of mind. A renowned Thai meditation master was once asked what his take on the world was. His concise summary was, "Lost in thought."

Imagine being in a lovely and peaceful meadow, with a train full of thoughts and feelings and desires rolling by in the distance . . . Normally, as this train approaches we tend to become fascinated, drawn in some significant way, and we hop on board and get carried away . . . lost in thought.

On the other hand, mindfulness allows you to see the train coming but have the presence of mind . . . to stay in the meadow! And whenever you get swept along by the train, as soon as you notice that, whoosh, you return immediately to the peaceful meadow, to the refuge of mindfulness.

Where Is Mindfulness to Be Established?

The Buddha named four "establishments," "foundations," or "frames of reference" of mindfulness (depending on how the original term is translated):

- Body, both as an objective entity and as a subjective experience of sensations, sights, sounds, smells, and tastes
- "Feelings" which mean not emotions but the tones of pleasant or unpleasant or neutral that come with every experience

- "Mind," which means consciousness and states of consciousness
- "Phenomena," (sometimes translated as "formations") which means all the other contents of mind, including thoughts, emotions, desires, images, plans, inner conflicts, views, murky psychological dynamics, transference from childhood, etc.

"And what is right mindfulness? Here a person dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed longing and dejection in regard to the world. He or she dwells contemplating feelings in feelings [the tone of experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral], ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed longing and dejection in regard to the world. He or she dwells contemplating mind in mind [consciousness and states of consciousness], ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed longing and dejection in regard to the world. He or she dwells contemplating phenomena in phenomena [all of the mental "formations," such as thoughts, emotions, wants, etc.], ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed longing and dejection in regard to the world."

[BW, p. 281]

"Contemplating body in the body" (or feelings in feelings, etc.) means being simply aware of immediate, experiential phenomena as it is without conceptualization or commentary. Just the sensations of the rising breath in the belly. Just the subtle feeling of a sound being mildly unpleasant. Just the sense of consciousness being contracted or spacious. Just a single thought emerging and then disappearing. Just this moment. Just this.

Mindfulness in Meditation

Meditation is the preeminent opportunity to practice and to cultivate mindfulness. This is a progressive process in which " . . . *the mind is steadied internally, quieted, brought to singleness, and concentrated,*" leading to liberating insight.

Buddhism is a 2500 year tradition of dedicated practitioners using skillful means to achieve these deepening states of awareness. And recently, research on the brain has both corroborated and enriched that tradition with findings that have practical implications for how to have meditation be as effective as possible.

Some of these findings are specific to steadying the mind . . . or to quieting it . . . or to bringing it to singleness . . . or to concentrating it. Others are more general, and they are presented in the rest of this article. Think of these as practical tools that you can pick and choose among to find whatever might be helpful.

Continuity of Mindfulness

But mindfulness is not reserved just for some special period of meditation in the day, but is to become as continuous as possible, whether sitting, standing, walking, or lying down . . . or doing acts of the body, speech, or mind . . . or answering the telephone, responding to emails, arguing with a family member, doing the crossword, eating, watching the news on TV, and so on.

Consider this story from the book, *Knee Deep in Grace* (p. 83), about Dipa Ma, the great Indian teacher - and housewife and grandmother:

"Dipa Ma was a living example of how to live in this world, of how practice and the mundane activities of our day-to-day existence can be made one. She insisted that the practice be done all the time, and that we do the things we do throughout the day without making them into problems. Dipa Ma wanted to know, "How awake are you in your life? Are you just thinking about being mindful, or are you really doing it?" Dipa Ma said that even while she was talking, she was meditating. Talking, eating, working, thinking about her daughter, playing with her grandson---none of those activities hampered her practice because she did them all with mindfulness. "When I'm moving, shopping, everything, I'm always doing it with mindfulness. I know these are things I have to do, but they aren't problems. On the other hand, I don't spend time gossiping or visiting or doing anything which I don't consider necessary in my life."

For more information about ways to weave mindfulness throughout daily life, please see the article at www.WiseBrain.org/articles.html titled "Continuity of Mindfulness."

Some of the key factors promoting mindfulness are summarized in the rest of this section.

Being Awake

When you can, meditate during the times when you are maximally alert within your own sleep-wake cycle. (Of course, this is irrelevant on a retreat where you are meditating 10 or more hours a day.)

Minimize drains on your wakefulness, such as lack of sleep, fatigue, illness, hormonal conditions (e.g., thyroid problems), or depression

In sum: take care of yourself. Pay attention to physical factors, rather than trying to muscle through them or beat yourself up for not being able to overcome them.

Being Alert

Several factors increase alertness:

- Posture - Provides internal, somatosensory feedback to the reticular formations that lead to alertness. Being upright says to the mind: "Wake up!"
- "Brightening the mind" - Here you deliberately activate an internal sense of energizing and enlivening your mind. In physiological terms, this is often correlated with a surge of norepinephrine, which helps you feel both alert and relaxed.

This is distinct from a surge of epinephrine - adrenaline - which indeed wakes the whole body up, but also has a kind of jangly, fight-or-flight quality to it. Adrenaline is a key element of the sympathetic nervous system, which you want to dampen during meditation. And adrenaline decays into secondary metabolites that remain in the body for hours and have a stressful, disturbing quality to them.

Sometimes you may want to trigger an adrenaline-based surge of "darn it, focus, get here now!" in order to wake yourself up. But only in small doses, and consider the "brightening the mind" approach instead.

- Oxygen - Oxygen is to the brain what gas is to your car. By taking several deep breaths, you increase the oxygen saturation in your blood and thus "push the pedal" with your brain.

Feeling Safe

To help us survive, the brain is naturally vigilant, routinely moving attention across the environment to look for threats. Feeling safe encourages the brain to withdraw the sentries from the battlements, so to say, and put them to work internally (e.g., keeping watch on the breath).

For example, there is the Buddha's recurring instruction to find a place of seclusion - i.e., safety - and then sit down at the base of a tree - where he found his own enlightenment - with your back to it, protecting your most vulnerable flank. Other traditional practices help one get used to, and thus relax about, perceived threats - such as meditating on the jungle side of a well or simply being alone in the forest at night. And some practices have a welcome side effect of helping one to overcome fear, even if that is not their primary purpose (e.g., charnel ground meditations, lovingkindness meditation)

Some methods for feeling safe:

- Diaphragm breathing
- Relaxing the body
- Imagery

- Taking refuge
- Disputing or detaching from worries or other views that make you anxious

Feeling Happy

The main Pali words that refer to positive emotions are "sukha" (happiness, contentment, tranquility) and "piti" (rapture, bliss). These are also two of the five factors that cultivate deep states of concentration, including those known as the "jhana."

Positive feelings:

- Have vigor and pep, and thus foster greater alertness
- Activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which reduces the distractions of the "fight-or-flight" system, and brings relaxation and attention to the body
- Increase overall resilience, so you're less likely to be bothered by something when you meditate
- Counteract negative emotions, which consume attention (plus feel lousy)

Feeling happy is skillful means!

Here are some ways to generate positive emotions:

- The "soft smile" recommended by Thich Nat Han triggers feedback loops within the emotional circuitry of the brain, activating the feelings associated with smiling
- Metta practice - compassion, lovingkindness, etc. - bathes you in positive emotion.
- Remember past states of positive emotion ("taking in" them helps support this memory). Then access that bodily/emotional memory to rekindle the positive feeling.

Right Concentration

Introduction

Concentration is a natural ability that everyone has, and everyone can get increasingly better at it. It's like a muscle: by exercising it, you make it stronger.

To do that, alas, we must accept "failing" over and over again. For most people, especially those new to meditation, it is difficult to stay engaged with more than a few breaths in a row - or less! - without the mind wandering off to something else.

So it's especially important to find that middle way between being uncaring and being harsh with yourself. When your mind wanders, try not to be self-critical, but simply get back into full awareness of the next breath. It's not what happened in the past that matters but what you do now and now and now.

Benefits of concentration

Cultivates the will.

Trains the mind to a greater steadiness, thus aiding both sila and insight.

Overcomes the hindrances (greed/lust, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt). The deepest states of concentration known as "jhanas" or "samadhis," eliminate the hindrances for the temporary (i.e., impermanent) duration of the state; this is one of the rewards of the jhanas/samadhis.

Breeds conviction and faith: The deeper states of concentration are not ordinary states, and when you experience them, it becomes palpably clear that the fruits of practice include increasingly stable, profound, wonderful, joyous, magnificent conditions of the heart and mind.

Factors of concentration

- Applying your attention - This is the deliberate focusing of attention on an object, whether a teacher's presentation, the sensations at the upper lip, or interesting stillness between two thoughts.
- Sustaining attention - This means staying with the object of attention. Sometimes the metaphor of rubbing is used, like two sticks rubbing together, staying in contact throughout. Sally Clough, a Spirit Rock teacher, combines applying and sustaining attention (especially applicable for the breath) into a single metaphor from ice skating: applying attention is like planting your foot, and sustaining it means gliding along; then at the end of the inhalation (for example), you plant your foot again (= focusing on the exhalation) and then glide along the length of the exhalation, staying in contact with every part of it.
- Rapture - A strong sense of bliss, often felt particularly in the body, often with an energizing, upwardly moving sense to it.

- Happiness - Also a definite, unmistakable feeling, that sometimes shades into a quality of contentment or perhaps tranquility.

- One-pointedness - This is the mind brought to singleness, in which there is a kind of unitary state in which all elements of experience are experienced as a whole; there is often a sense when this factor arises of a kind of ka-chunk, of all the pieces coming together.

→ These factors can vary in their intensity from sitting to sitting. In particular, the factor of rapture can be experienced over time as a bit jangly and too intense, and give way increasingly to the factor of happiness.

→ Try to register a clear sense of each factor, so that you know what it feels like and can find your way back to it again.

→ To an extent (and which usually grows with practice), you can invite, call up, or invoke each factor. Traditionally, you can say in your mind, "May rapture (or happiness, etc.) awaken (or arise, or be present)." If it comes, conditions are ripe. If it does not come, be patient and keep cultivating the causes of its arising and have faith that it will come.

→ Getting tense with yourself or impatient will not serve. Relaxation and happiness are the immediate causes of concentration. Striving is a form of clinging.

Access concentration

This is a state in which the five factors are present, but you haven't yet tipped fully into the jhanas. Applying and sustaining attention take little effort; the mind is quite quiet, with thoughts apparent as discrete entities, coming and going; the body commonly feels both light and grounded. Get to know this state well so you can readily settle into it.

The jhanas

These are progressively deeper and more subtle states of deep meditative absorption. There are four "form" jhanas, in which there is still a clear sense of ordinary physical reality. Then there are the four "formless attainments," which can - if the causes are ripe - culminate in Nibbana.

Descriptions vary regarding what is a jhana and what isn't. In our experience, these are unmistakable, remarkable, non-ordinary states of being that have a self-evident persuasiveness when they come upon you.

In the Buddha's description, which is repeated verbatim or with minor changes throughout the Pali Canon:

"And what, monks, is right concentration? Here monks, secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a person enters and dwells in the first jhana, which is accompanied by thought and examination [i.e., applied and sustained attention] with rapture and happiness born of seclusion.

With the subsiding of thought and examination, she or she enters and dwells in the second jhana, which has internal confidence and unification of mind, is without thought and examination, and has happiness and rapture born of concentration.

With the fading away as well of rapture, the person dwells equanimous, and mindful and clearly comprehending, he or she experiences happiness with the body; he or she enters and dwells in the third jhana of which the noble ones declare: 'He or she is equanimous, mindful, one who dwells happily.'

With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous passing away of joy and dejection, the person enters and dwells in the fourth jhana, which is neither painful nor pleasant and includes the purification of mindfulness by equanimity.

This is called right concentration."