

The Thread of Attention

The essence of the Buddha's teaching is to turn our undisciplined mind into a disciplined mind. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Madison, Wisconsin, May 2007

The Dalai Lama went on to point out in this teaching how the undisciplined mind is the root of all suffering. He speaks of spirituality as being about *thought transformation*: “freedom found through the discipline of the mind.” In all the teachings of his that I have attended, he focuses on the “supreme vehicle,” which is mindfulness: “Spiritual seekers are seeking an equanimous state of being. This mindfulness (supreme vehicle) is what helps transcend duality.” It helps transcend a mind that sees and experiences separation. The Bible points to this supreme vehicle as well: “Be still and know that I am God.” For me, this means to be still and know “I am that.”

An undisciplined mind, an inability to stay focused, makes you vulnerable to internal and external distractions and dangers. These distractions can ultimately lead you away from your spiritual and creative aspirations. *There is one practice above all others that leads to your hearing the call, listening to it, and being able to follow it because you are not distracted from it.* This tool, which I am fortunate to have been introduced to at the age of sixteen, is the practice of meditation, of cultivating attention. Through the cultivation of attention, you are generating a disciplined mind.

One morning when I was meditating (and knowing I was going to teach on this topic), I noticed how everything sane, beautiful, and creative in my life is so because of my meditation practice—this practice gives me the *ability to put my attention where I choose*. I can be of benefit to others and keep my seat during difficulty because I have the ability to practice guiding my attention where I choose in any given moment, thus training my mind. (I do not claim that I always, in all situations, successfully use this skill, but

I am quick to discover when I have let go of the thread of mindfulness because my world begins to spin out of control.)

This is what you must go for. Nothing else in your spiritual practice or in your psycho-emotional work compares with your ability to place your attention where you want it to be. Cultivating attention is really about letting go. Instead of holding onto the past, or the negative thought pattern, or the outside drama, we let it go. The Buddha in his teachings refers to this as “leaving things as they are.” There is much sanity and peace in just leaving things as they are—not trying to change or control anything and everything. This teaches us to be the cause rather than the effect of our lives. We are not so bounced around by outer conditions. We are then able to transform our thoughts and the world around us.

Direct spiritual experience is dependent upon our ability to focus our attention.

Mindfulness helps us make conscious choices that result in more favorable outcomes, because whatever we give our attention to *becomes*. Many who seek consultation with me want to know their calling or know how to follow a calling when they already know what it is. Many ask, “What stops me from following my heart and doing what I love?” Every time I receive a flier or read an ad in a magazine on an upcoming conference, there is typically a workshop on “finding your purpose.”

How is it we don't know our calling? How is it we don't get down to following our bliss, as Joseph Campbell would say? How much of our money, time, and thought goes into trying to figure out what our purpose in life is? I would say that everyone knows their calling—it gets down to listening to the call and following it rather than getting lost in all the distractions. And, as I discuss in my book, *Wheel of Initiation*, distractions are as boundless as stars in the universe. This is what makes cultivating attention central to your personal spiritual initiation—there will be all sorts of demons

showing up to scare you off your path.

Disturbing thoughts and other distractions become like wet snow on a hot highway when we are in presence. With enough warmth of awareness, the “snow” (distractions) soon dissolves. Often the metaphor of a muddy glass of water is given to illustrate the power of sitting meditation. Let a dirty glass of water sit still long enough, and the mud will settle to the bottom, leaving clear, drinkable water on top. The mind works in a similar fashion. Let it rest long enough in the mindfulness of the moment (resting in the breath), and it too will settle down. Mindfulness meditation practices are often called practices in “calm abiding.”

Because there are many practices of cultivating attention, developing mindfulness, and transforming the mind through meditation, only a few will be described here. **However, there are fundamental characteristics of any given meditation practice that are necessary for the practice to generate attention and help transform the mind.** Use these as parameters as you find your own practice.

1. You must be actively cultivating attention through the practice, not just reciting a mantra or simply sitting on the cushion and breathing.
2. Sitting includes a practice of “letting go,” an observation of impermanence. For example, you meditate on the breath, letting each one go. You practice letting go of thoughts and return to the breath or the mantra. You may also meditate on the aspects of impermanence.
3. You sit through the rising and falling of different emotional, psycho- logical, and physical states as you return your attention to the object of your meditation (the mantra or the breath).

4. There are no preferences or attachments to certain states, such as bliss, clarity, or insights. This follows on a previous characteristic of a true practice—you are willing to let go of a preferred state and be with whatever else is arising in the moment. You open again and again to the reality of presence. When I was introduced and initiated into my first meditation practice at the age of sixteen, (which was Transcendental Meditation), I would say it saved my life. At the group sessions that I attended, every- one seemed to be walking about in a state of bliss. Being sixteen, my normal state was more often than not a state of agitation. When I began meditating with a mantra, I mostly meditated by myself. What I sought was inner and outer peace. Later in life, when I was trained in Vipassana meditation, my teacher at the time, Shinzen Young, would remind us, “Don’t prefer. No preference, just presence.” What a wonderful tool to take with me in the world—the ability to let go of preferences! When we are attached to preferences and how things *should* be, we are no longer in calm abiding. This does not mean I don’t have preferences and wants! What it means is that I have an expanded capacity to let go of what I think should be happening and embrace what is actually taking place. This allows me to respond to what is really going on rather than what I wish was going on.
5. The sitting meditation practice is understood as a means to tame the mind, to still the mind and prepare it for mind transformation (mind training). You can’t train a wild animal until you have quieted it down enough. (It’s hard to catch a flying bird).
6. You understand that all your internal issues are likely to arise on your meditation cushion and that this is also a place of transformation as you practice “holding your seat,” sitting still and being attentive—keeping hold of the Sacred Thread

of attention no matter what arises. So, for example, any impatience you feel during your sitting practice is an opportunity to practice calm abiding with this particular emotional state. This transforms a distracting emotional state into an opportunity to practice closing the door on distractions, as Geshe Tenzin Dorje pointed out early on.

7. Finally, your meditation practice is preceded and followed by the study of your chosen spiritual discipline. This means you are committed to a given spiritual practice and its ensuing principles.

In general, I recommend receiving instruction from a qualified teacher or attending local group meditations. However, there are many good books with accompanying CDs that can bring the practice home to you.

Establishing a Practice

Throw everything else away if you only have time for one practice and give your time to meditation. Calm the mind and contemplate spiritual principles, and the rest of your life will come into alignment with your practice. A teacher once shared this story of a Tibetan monk who was imprisoned around the time the Dalai Lama was exiled to India. This monk spent most of his adult life in prison, undergoing abuse and torture by the Chinese government. On his release, he met up with his friend the Dalai Lama.

“Each day I was quite afraid,” he said. The Dalai Lama listened. “I was not afraid for my life. Every day I feared that I would lose my compassion for the Chinese.”

Sustain the Practice

As we practice, challenges to our stamina to see the journey through to the end are likely to show up. The challenges may manifest as fears, disappointments, distractions and anxieties, or

anything that attempts to separate us from ourselves, from our spiritual source, and from our equanimity. Much can come up that tries to rid us of our humanity and compassion. The imprisoned monk knew that to lose his compassion was a much greater danger than the loss of his own life. His life was something the Chinese government could take any time, but his compassion, his connection to his humanity, was something he had regardless of outside circumstance and could only be given away through his consent. Sometimes sticking to the spiritual and ethical path feels like a burden because you may be surrounded by difficulties or the success of your spiritual pilgrimage seems so far off. How many hours, days, years did this monk deal with abuse while sustaining his compassion?

We can use the fears and difficulty that arise in our life as pointers to what attempts to hold us back, to rob us of our humanity, and to keep us stuck in the illusion of separateness. We could choose to give up. So when that which tries to separate you from truth arises, you have the golden thread of attention to bring you back to your intentions, to your spiritual principles, and to the present moment. Hold the Sacred Thread of attention long enough, and you will survive the danger. ***Keep your attention on your practice.***

At a time of difficulty, if you choose instead to act from a place of frustration and separation, you will strengthen the sense of separation. Or if you give vent to your frustration and thrash about, thus crashing through the woods, you will strengthen the habitual response and lose sight of your intention. Instead, if you choose to, sit still, keep hold of the thread, and you will save the world.

Difficult times present you with an opportunity to keep hold of the Sacred Thread, to heal your part of the separation that threatens us all.

Any time you are feeling disconnected, defeated, afraid, or anxious, find the thread back to the moment, and be willing to do whatever it takes to keep hold of your compassion and humanity. Just for

now. Just for his moment. When we do not have a meditation practice and do not bring awareness to our initiatory intentions and agreements and then find ourselves confronted again and again by abusive prison guards and Troublemakers, we *feel captive once more of negative states, and we project these outward onto our lives and the lives of others.*

Only through various practices of cultivating attention *and* transforming our thoughts can true, lasting freedom, and happiness abide.

By knowing how to succeed in tranquil repose, one is able to obtain careful deliberation. By knowing how to obtain careful deliberation, one is able to harvest what he really wants to pursue.
–Shantideva

While walking the spiral as the sun rose, a white egret circled above me, making a spiral in the sky. While she flew in the morning mist, she would frequently disappear into the white-blue morning sky. At times she and the sky were one, at times the sky was a backdrop to her flight. After a few turns above, she landed in a nearby pond. As I walked through the spiral, my mind went in and out of the present moment and I found myself eclipsed by my thoughts. I brought myself back to my walk and my meditation.

Then I noticed how these discursive thoughts arose from where my attention also arose, and that behind these thoughts was the luminosity of my mind. I experienced these thoughts momentarily as *part of the luminous mind*, and I was struck by how these discursive and sometimes disruptive thoughts also arise from the sky-like nature of mind. When I was watching these thoughts, they too would at times disappear into the sky-like void of my mind, like the disappearing and reappearing egret.

This experience showed me the true nature of mind: Our thoughts are like the white egret, part of the luminous void and yet

distinctive also. Ultimately, however, there is no separation, not even in the mind.

THE GREAT VEHICLE: MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

“The inner shrine by which God’s name is hallowed can be developed only through letting go, releasing some of the clutter inside that keeps us too busy to be silent and receptive to the “still small voice.”

Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos*

Through the more psychological practices offered in various spiritual traditions, we can released some of the inner clutter and can more easily hear the inner voice and experience our connection to our inherent light and to reality. As we watch the mind, we see how shallow thought is, because the movement of thought lies mostly in words and conceptualizations. But at a deeper level there is a movement in our mind that can be experienced when we no longer rely on words and concepts, when we’re just *experiencing presence*.

In this state, our thoughts become like the white egret and dissolve into the vastness. At this level, we experience a strong pull we could almost call a homesickness, a longing to be home, to return to the source, to be whole. It is through being still that we can experience this connection that we long for; a connection that is always present.

Experience the Moment Through the Breath

Simply begin with a fifteen-minute morning meditation practice of sitting and watching the breath. If you already engage in regular morning meditation, consider adding fifteen minutes to your already existing practice. Begin with fifteen minutes until you can practice up to forty minutes each morning. The point is to establish a routine of daily meditation; the most challenging part will be actually showing up and taking the time to sit and practice.

Choose a specific time each morning for meditation. Commit to show up at this time and place even if you don't believe you have time to meditate. What you will find is that once you show up and are ready, you will make the time.

Sit like a mountain, erect but naturally alert, not rigid. Your spine should be straight and not resting fully on the back of a chair. Neither should you slouch if you are on a cushion. If you can, sit on a zafu (a meditation cushion) or stool, whatever allows for an erect spine. Relax your shoulders and take a couple of deep breaths into the belly. If you like, release a few purification breaths—“Ahhs”—on the exhalation. Then bring your awareness to your body, *sitting*. Bring your attention to the physical sensations of the body. Relax your awareness in the body, *sitting*. Notice any sensations, without judgments, that may be rising and falling in the body.

Then, as you continue to breathe naturally, choose a place in the body where you can bring your attention to the breath (either the rise and fall of the belly or, more commonly, the in-and-out of the breath through the nostrils). Let this be where your attention returns, to the breath. Let the breath breathe by itself. Make no effort, just breathe. Then rest your awareness in the physical sensation of breathing. Rest your awareness there as best you can. Rest in the sensations of your body sitting, your body breathing . . . Then give your attention to just being—have a sense of your own presence. *Just sit, breathe, and be*. Let go of thought and expectations, just rest in the breath and the body sitting, rest in the moment of being.

If you find your mind wanders off, which it routinely will, bring your attention back to the present moment through the body and your breathing. Return your awareness to the physical sensations of breath, lovingly and compassionately. Try not to add to the thinking mind by judging your practice or getting down on yourself if your mind wanders off. I spend much of my time in my

sitting practice returning my attention to my breath.

Use the leash of awareness to bring you back to just sitting, just breathing, just being.

Practice compassionate action on the spot with yourself by letting go of all the mental constructions, and just rest your awareness in sitting, breathing, and being . . .

When you find yourself caught up in thoughts, label them by saying silently to yourself, “Thinking, thinking,” and then return to the breath. Labeling thoughts can help you realize more fully that thought is just that— thought. Otherwise you find yourself building on these thoughts and losing your experience of calm abiding. This tames and disciplines the mind, which is a strong aspiration of the North. This also prepares us to move East, into initiation.

Compassionate response to yourself as you sit in meditation is an important part of the practice. Do your best not to become impatient and annoyed with yourself if and when you are distracted by your thoughts. You may also get upset with yourself about being upset, and on and on the judgment goes . . . until you bring compassion and equanimity to it. Then, in that instant, all the layers of thoughts and feeling in the moment dissolve. Notice that!

You generate a lot of freedom and bring forth the inherent qualities of presence, wisdom, and love when you practice sitting meditation consistently enough. Many of my meditation teachers suggest that along with a daily sitting practice, we attend at least one four-day retreat and one ten-day retreat a year. When this is not possible, maintain your daily practice and try a full day here and there to help you move through the various layers of resistance and distractions that typically arise.

What I have found is that when one is halfway through a retreat experience, or halfway through the Wheel, the big distractions

arise. This is when the big deal-breaker may surface, and you find yourself sitting in the Catku of your meditation practice. *Keep sitting* and move to the other side through the realization that everything passes.

One day, as I stated my Bodhisattva vow out loud at the start of my daily walk on the spiral in my prairie, I prayed to be free of the thoughts and concerns that clouded the true nature of my mind. I looked up and saw an eagle flying from the South. It arrived above the spiral and flew in a few circles, mirroring the spiral. Such sights on my walks are a true blessing and have a calming effect on me. Just as this experience arose, two small birds appeared and began to peck and swoop at the eagle. Bothered, the eagle flew off and out of sight.

This pointed to how getting caught up in internal gossip, pondering others' faults, or being distracted by worries chases off the true nature of the mind, and we lose the bigger picture. To obtain an eagle's view, we need to tame the mind through regular meditation practice so as not to be chased about by the pecking of our thoughts.

Hand on Heart Meditation. This meditation can be practiced for just a few minutes. This helps rewire the “fight and flight” response we tend to have to circumstances to a “calm-abiding.”

Take a couple deep breaths and then close your eyes. Place your right hand on your heart chakra. Take a few moments to appreciate the sensation of touch. Then notice the breath and how it rises and falls with the hand on heart. Rest in the awareness of breath and hand on heart. Then bring to mind a favorable memory of a time you felt completely loved. This can be with a person, pet, spirit or in nature, preferably a memory that takes place with another person. It can be in the deep past or recent. Hang out with this

memory for a couple minutes while keeping your hand on your heart. Repeat the memory if it is a brief one. Do your best not to move away from it. Then take a couple more nice deep breaths and bring to mind recent and simple things you are thankful for. Then take another nice deep breath and open your eyes.