

# Insight Meditation: Basic and Progressive Stages

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## SEEKING HAPPINESS

It is a truism to say that nobody likes suffering and everybody seeks happiness. In this world of ours, human beings are making all possible efforts for prevention and alleviation of suffering and enjoyment of happiness. Nevertheless, their efforts are mainly directed to the physical well-being by material means. Happiness is, after all, conditioned by attitudes of mind, and yet only a few persons give real thought to mental development; fewer still practice mind-training in earnest.

To illustrate this point, attention may be drawn to the commonplace habits of cleaning and tidying up one's body; the endless pursuits of food, clothing, and shelter; and the tremendous technological progress achieved for raising the material standard of living, for improving the means of transport and communications, and for prevention and cure of diseases and ailments. All these strivings are, in the main, concerned with the care and nourishment of the body. It must be recognized that they are essential. However, these human efforts and achievements cannot possibly bring about the alleviation or eradication of suffering associated with old age and disease, domestic infelicity and economic troubles; in short, with non-satisfaction of wants and desires. Sufferings of this nature are not overcome by material means; they can be overcome only by mind-training and mental development.

Therefore, it becomes clear that the right way must be sought for training, stabilizing, and purifying the mind. This way is found in the Maha Satipatthana Sutta, a well-known discourse of the Buddha, delivered well over twenty-five hundred years ago. The Buddha declared thus:

This is the sole way for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the destroying of pain and grief; for reaching the right path, for the realization of Nirvana, namely the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

## BASIC PRACTICE

**Preparatory Stage:** If you sincerely desire to develop contemplation and attain insight in this your present life, you must give up worldly thoughts and actions during training. This course of action is for the purification of conduct, the essential preliminary step toward the proper development of contemplation. You must also observe the rules of discipline prescribed for laymen (or for monks, as the case may be), for they are important in gaining insight. For layfolk, these rules comprise the eight precepts which Buddhist devotees observe on holidays and during periods of meditation. These voluntary precepts are abstention from:

- (1) killing,
- (2) stealing,
- (3) sexual intercourse,
- (4) Lying,
- (5) intoxicants,
- (6) eating solid foods after noon,
- (7) dance, shows, wearing flowers, perfume, and adornments, and
- (8) high and luxurious beds.

An additional rule is not to speak with contempt, in jest, or malice to or about any of the noble ones who have attained states of enlightenment.

The old masters of Buddhist tradition suggest that you entrust yourself to the enlightened one, the Buddha, during the training period, for you may be alarmed if it happens that your own state of mind produces unwholesome or frightening visions during contemplation. Also place yourself under the guidance of your meditation instructor, for he can talk to you frankly about your work in contemplation and give you the guidance he thinks necessary.

The aim of this practice and its greatest benefit is release. from greed, hatred, and delusion, which are the roots of all-evil and suffering. This intensive course in insight training can lead you to such release. So work ardently with this end in view so that your training will be successfully completed. This kind of training in contemplation, based on the foundations of mindfulness (satipatthana), is that taken by all Buddha and noble ones, for attaining enlightenment. You are to be congratulated on having the opportunity to take the same kind of training.

## **BEFORE YOU MEDITATE**

It is also important for you to begin your training with a brief contemplation on the 'four protections' which the Buddha offers you for reflection. It is helpful for your psychological welfare at this stage to reflect on them. The subjects of these four protective reflections are the Buddha himself, loving-kindness, the loathsome aspects of the body, and death.

**First**, devote yourself to the Buddha by sincerely appreciating his nine chief qualities in this way:

*-- Truly, the Buddha is holy, fully enlightened, perfect in knowledge and conduct, a welfare, world-knower, the incomparable leader of men to be tamed, teacher of gods and mankind, the awakened and exalted One.*

**Second**, reflect upon all sentient beings as the receivers of your loving-kindness, be fortified by your thoughts of loving-kindness and identify yourself with all sentient beings without distinction, thus:

*-- May I be free from enmity, disease and grief ... As I am, so also may my parents, preceptors, and teachers, intimate, unknown, indeed all other beings be free from enmity, disease, and grief. May they be released from suffering.*

**Third**, reflect upon the repulsive nature of the body to assist you in diminishing the unwholesome attachment that so many people have for the body. Dwell upon some of its

impurities, such as stomach, intestines, phlegm, pus, and blood. Ponder these impurities so that the absurd fondness of the body may be eliminated.

The **fourth protection** for your psychological benefit is to reflect on the phenomenon of ever-approaching death. Buddhist teaching stress that life is uncertain but death is certain, life is precarious but death is sure. Life has death as its goal. There is birth, disease, suffering, old age, and eventual death. These are all aspects of the process of existence.

## HOW TO SIT

To begin training, take the sitting posture, and sit erect with legs crossed. You might feel more comfortable if the legs are not interlocked but evenly placed on the ground, without pressing one against the other. Have your meditation teacher explain the sitting posture in detail. If you find that sitting on the floor interferes with contemplation, then obtain a more comfortable way of sitting. Now proceed with each exercise in contemplation as described.

**Basic Exercise I:** Try to keep your mind (but not your eyes) on the abdomen. You will thereby come to know the movements of rising and falling, the expansion and contraction of this organ. If these movements are not clear to you in the beginning, then place both hands on the abdomen to feel these rising and falling movements. After a short time the outward movement of inhalation and the inward movement of exhalation will become clear. Then make a mental note, rising for the outward movement, falling for the inward movement. Your mental note of each movement must be made while it occurs. From this exercise you learn the actual manner of the movements of the abdomen. You are not concerned with the form of the abdomen. What you actually perceive is the bodily sensation of pressure caused by the heaving movement of the abdomen. So do not dwell on the form of the abdomen but proceed with the exercise.

## DIFFICULTIES FOR BEGINNERS

For the beginner it is a very effective method of developing the facilities of attention, concentration of mind and insight in contemplation. As practice increases, the manner of movement will be clearer. The ability to know each successive occurrence of the mental and physical processes at each of the six sense-organs is acquired only when insight contemplation is fully developed. Since you are a beginner whose attentiveness and power of concentration are still weak, you may find it difficult to keep the mind on each successive rising movement and falling movement as it occurs. In view of this difficulty, you may be inclined to think: "I just don't know how to keep my mind on each of these movements." Then simply remember that this is a learning process. The rising and falling movements of the abdomen are always present, and therefore there is no need to look for them. Actually with practice it becomes easy for a beginner to keep his mind on these two simple movements. Continue with this exercise in full awareness of the abdomen's rising and falling movements. Never verbally repeat the words rising, falling, although you may make a mental note rising and falling in the mind silently as they occur. Be clearly aware only of the actual process of the rising and falling movement of the abdomen.

## BREATHING MANNERS

Avoid deep or rapid breathing for the purpose of making the abdominal movements more distinct, because this procedure causes fatigue that interferes with the practice. Just be totally aware of the movements of rising and falling as they occur in the course of normal breathing.

## HOW TO REACT TO THE WONDERING MIND

While occupied with the exercise of observing each of the abdominal movements, other mental activities may occur between the noting of each rising and falling. Thoughts or other mental functions, such as intentions, ideas, imaginings, etc., are likely to occur between each mental note of rising and falling. They cannot be disregarded. A mental note must be made of each as it occurs.

If you imagine something, you must know that you have done so and make a mental note imagining. If you simply think of something, mentally note thinking. If you reflect, reflecting. If you intend to do something, intending. When the mind wanders from the object of meditation, which is the rising and falling of the abdomen, mentally note wandering. Should you imagine you are going to a certain place, mentally note going. When you arrive, arriving. When, in your thoughts, you meet a person, note meeting. Should you speak to him or her, note speaking. If you imaginatively argue with that person, arguing. If you envision and imagine a light or color, be sure to note seeing. A mental vision must be noted on each occurrence of its appearance until it passes away. After its disappearance, continue with *Basic Exercise I* by being fully aware of each movement of the rising and falling abdomen. Proceed carefully, without slackening. If you intend to swallow saliva while thus engaged, make a mental note intending. While in the act of swallowing, swallowing. If you intend to spit, spitting. Then return to the exercise of rising and falling. Suppose you intend to bend the neck, intending. In the act of bending, bending. When you intend to straighten the neck, intending. In the act of straightening the neck, straightening. The neck movements of bending and straightening must be done slowly. After mentally making a note of each of these actions, proceed in full awareness with noticing the movements of the rising and falling abdomen.

## HOW TO REACT TO THE PAINFUL SENSATION

Since you must continue contemplating for a long time while in one position, that of sitting or lying down, you are likely to experience an intense feeling of fatigue, stiffness in the body or in the arms and legs. Should this happen, simply keep the knowing mind on that part of the body where such feeling occurs and carry on the contemplation, noting tired or stiff. Do this naturally, that is, neither too fast nor too slow. These feelings gradually become fainter and finally cease altogether. Should one of these feelings become more intense until the bodily fatigue or stiffness of joints is unbearable, then change your position. However, do not forget to make a mental note of intending, before you proceed to change position. Each detailed movement must be contemplated in its respective order.

## **YOU MAY CHANGE THE BODY POSITION, BUT....**

If you intend to lift the hand or leg, make a mental note, intending. In the act of lifting the hand or leg, lifting. Stretching either the hand or leg, stretching. When you bend, bending. When putting down, putting. Should either the hand or leg touch, touching. Perform all these actions in a slow, deliberate manner. As soon as you are settled in the new position, continue with the contemplation of the abdominal movements. If you become uncomfortably warm in the new position, resume contemplation in another position keeping to the procedure as described in this paragraph.

Should an itching sensation be felt in any part of the body, keep the mind on that part and make a mental note, itching. Do this in a regulated manner, neither too fast nor too slow. When the itching sensation disappears in the course of full awareness, continue with the exercise of noticing the rising and falling of the abdomen. Should the itching continue and become too strong and you intend to rub the itching part, be sure to make a mental note, intending. Slowly lift the hand, simultaneously noting the action of lifting, and touching when the hand touches the part that itches. Rub slowly in complete awareness of rubbing. When the itching sensation has disappeared and you intend to discontinue the rubbing, be mindful by making the usual mental note of the action, withdrawing. When the hand rests in its usual place touching the leg, touching. Then again devote your time to observing the abdominal movements.

If there is pain or discomfort, keep the knowing mind on that part of the body where the sensation arises. Make a mental note of the specific sensation as it occurs, such as painful, aching, pressing, piercing, tired, giddy. It must be stressed that the mental note must not be forced nor delayed but made in a calm and natural manner. The pain may eventually cease or increase. Do not be alarmed if it increases. Firmly continue the contemplation. If you do so, you will find that the pain will almost always cease. But if, after a time, the pain has increased and becomes almost unbearable, you must ignore the pain and continue with the contemplation of rising and falling.

## **PAIN MAY DISCOURAGE MEDITATING**

As you progress in mindfulness you may experience sensations of intense pain: stifling or choking sensations such as pain from the slash of a knife, the thrust of a sharp-pointed instrument, unpleasant sensations of being pricked by sharp needles, or small insects crawling over the body. You might experience sensations of itching, biting, intense cold. As soon as you discontinue the contemplation you may also feel that these painful sensations cease. When you resume contemplation you will have them again as soon as you gain in mindfulness. These painful sensations are not to be considered as something serious. They are not manifestations of disease but are common factors always present in the body and are usually obscured when the mind is normally occupied with more conspicuous objects. When the mental faculties become keener you are more aware of these sensations. With the continued development of contemplation the time will arrive when you can overcome them and they cease altogether. If you continue contemplation, firm in purpose, you will not come to any harm. Should you lose courage, become irresolute in contemplation, and discontinue for a time, you may encounter these unpleasant sensations again and again as your contemplation proceeds. If you continue with determination you will most likely overcome these painful sensations and may never again experience them in the course of contemplation.

## HOW TO REACT SWAYING

Should you intend to sway the body, then knowingly note intending. While in the act of swaying, swaying. When contemplating you may occasionally discover the body swaying back and forth. Do not be alarmed; neither be pleased nor wish to continue to sway. The swaying will cease if you keep the knowing mind on the action of swaying and continue to note swaying until the action ceases. If swaying increases in spite of your making a mental note of it, then lean against a wall or post or lie down for a while. Thereafter proceed with contemplation. Follow the same procedure if you find yourself shaking or trembling. When contemplation is developed you may sometimes feel a thrill or chill pass through the back or the entire body. This is a symptom of the feeling of intense interest, enthusiasm, or rapture. It occurs naturally in the course of good contemplation. When your mind is fixed in contemplation you may be startled at the slightest sound. This takes place because you feel more intensely the effect of censorial impression while in the state of good concentration.

## HOW TO REACT FEELING

If you are thirsty while contemplating, notice the feeling, thirsty. When you intend to stand, intending. Then make a mental note of each movement in preparation for standing. Keep the mind intently on the act of standing up, and mentally note, standing. When you look forward after standing up straight, note looking, seeing. Should you intend to walk forward, intending. When you begin to step forward, mentally note each step as walking, walking or left, right. It is important for you to be aware of every moment in each step from beginning to end when you walk. Adhere to the same procedure when strolling or when taking a walking exercise. Try to make a mental note of each step in two sections as follows: lifting, putting; lifting, putting. When you have obtained sufficient practice in this manner of walking, then try to make a mental note of each step in three sections: lifting, moving, placing: or up, forward, down.

When you look at the water faucet, or water pot, on arriving at the place where you are to take a drink, be sure to make a mental note looking, seeing.

When you stop walking, stopping.  
When you stretch the hand, stretching.  
When the hand touches the cup, touching.  
When the hand takes the cup, taking.  
When the hand dips the cup into the water, dipping.  
When the hand brings the cup to the lips, bringing.  
When the cup touches the lips, touching.  
Should you feel cold at the touch, cold.  
When you swallow, swallowing.  
When returning the cup, returning.  
Withdrawing the hand, withdrawing.  
When you bring down your hand, bringing.  
When the hand touches the side of the body, touching.  
If you intend to turn back, intending.  
When you turn around, turning.  
When you walk forward, walking.  
On arriving at the place where you intend to stop, intending.  
When you stop, stopping.

If you remain standing for some time continue the contemplation of rising and falling. But if you intend to sit down, intending. When you go forward to sit down, walking. On arriving at the place where you will sit, arriving. When you turn to sit, turning. While in the act of sitting, sitting. Sit down slowly, and keep the mind on the downward movement of the body. You must notice every movement in bringing hands and legs into position. Then resume the prescribed exercise of contemplating the abdominal movements.

Should you intend to lie down, intending. Then proceed with the contemplation of every movement in the course of lying down: lifting, stretching, leaving, touching, and lying. Then make as the object of contemplation every movement in bringing hands, legs, and body into position. Perform these actions slowly. Thereafter continue with rising and falling. Should pain, fatigue, itching, or any other sensation be felt, be sure to notice each of these sensations. Notice all feelings, thoughts, ideas, considerations, reflections, and all movements of hands, legs, arms, and body. If there is nothing in particular to note, put the mind on the rising and falling of the abdomen. Make a mental note of drowsy, when drowsy, and sleepy, when sleepy. After you have gained sufficient concentration in contemplating you will be able to overcome drowsiness and sleepiness and feel refreshed as a result. Take up again the usual contemplation of the basic object. Suppose you are unable to overcome a drowsy feeling, you must then continue to contemplate until you fall asleep.

The state of sleep is the continuity of subconsciousness. It is similar to the first state of rebirth consciousness and the last state of consciousness at the moment of death. This state of consciousness is feeble and therefore unable to be aware of an object. When you are awake the continuity of subconsciousness occurs regularly between moments of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, and thinking. Because these occurrences are of brief duration they are usually not clear and therefore not noticeable. Continuity of subconsciousness remains during sleep—a fact, which becomes obvious when you wake up; for it is in the state of wakefulness that thoughts and dense objects become distinct.

Contemplation should start at the moment you wake up. Since you are a beginner, it may not yet be possible for you to start contemplating at the very first moment of wakefulness. But you should start with it from the moment when you remember that you are to contemplate. For example, if on awakening you reflect on something, you should become aware of the fact and begin your contemplation by a mental note, reflecting. Then proceed with the contemplation of rising and falling. When getting up from the bed, mindfulness should be directed to every detail of the body's activity. Each movement of the hands, legs, and body must be performed in complete awareness. Are you thinking of the time of the day when awakening? If so, note thinking. Do you intend to get out of bed? If so, note intending. If you prepare to move the body into position for rising, note preparing. As you slowly rise, rising. When you are in the sitting position, sitting. Should you remain sitting for any length of time, revert to contemplating the abdominal movements of rising and falling. Perform the acts of washing the face or taking a bath in their order and in complete awareness of every detailed movement; for instance, looking, seeing, stretching, holding, touching, feeling cold, rubbing. In the acts of dressing, making the bed, opening and closing doors and windows, handling objects, be occupied with every detail of these actions in their order.

You must attend to the contemplation of every detail in the action of eating:

When you look at the food, looking, seeing.  
When you arrange the food, arranging.  
When you bring the food to mouth, bringing.  
When you bend the neck forward, bending.  
When the food touches the mouth, touching.  
When placing the food in the mouth, placing.  
When the mouth closes, closing.  
When withdrawing the hand, withdrawing.  
Should the hand touch the plate, touching.  
When straightening the neck, straightening.  
When in the act of chewing, chewing.  
When you are aware of the taste, tasting.  
When swallowing the food, swallowing.  
Should, while swallowing, the food be felt touching the sides of the gullet, touching.

Perform contemplation in this manner each time you partake of a morsel of food until you finish the meal. In the beginning of the practice there will be many omissions. Never mind. Do not waver in your effort. You will make fewer omissions if you persist in your practice. When you reach an advanced stage of the practice, you will also be able to notice more details than those mentioned here.

## **WALKING MEDITATION**

Between sessions of the sitting practice that may last from forty to ninety minutes you can alternate with a walking meditation. This will help serve to balance the factors of concentration and energy and overcome sleepiness. On a quiet stretch of ground or in a room you can do this practice. It is best for this exercise if you walk deliberately much slower than usual. Something about the speed of a good slow march is ideal, but nevertheless you should walk in as simple and natural a manner as speed allows. During this walking exercise, you should focus attention on the movement of the feet and legs. You should note as the right foot begins to rise from the ground, lifting; as it moves forward, moving; and as it places again on the ground, placing. Similarly for the left foot, and so on.

In exactly the same manner as during the sitting breathing practice, all distracting thoughts or sensations should be noted in the opposite manner. If you happen to look up at something while 'walking, you should immediately register looking and revert to the movement of the feet. Looking about and noticing the details of objects, even those on your path is not a part of the practice. If you inadvertently do, then note looking.

On reaching the end of the path the need will arise to turn and walk in the opposite direction. You will become aware of this fact a pace or two before reaching the end. This intention to turn should be noted as intending. Intention may be hard to note at first but if concentration is strong, it will be seen. After noting the intention to turn, note all other details of the thoughts and movements involved in the turn. As the last step forward is taken and you begin actually to turn the body, you should note turning, as the other foot raises, lifting, turning, placing, and so on. Then as you step out again on the return path, lifting, moving, placing. There is often a temptation on coming to the end of your 'tether' to look up and glance around for something interesting. If this undisciplined impulse occurs it should be noted as intending, and the attention can revert naturally to the movement of the feet again.

It is normally best for beginners to develop this walking exercise with a three-stage noting technique as indicated. Lifting, moving, placing. Depending on your capacity, your instructor may recommend either fewer or more stages to register. At times walking too slowly is inconvenient, especially outside of your meditation surroundings, so a simple left, right, left, right, will suffice for these cases. The important point is not how many or how few points of noting you make, but whether you are really aware of them as they occur, or whether your mind is off 'woof gathering'. Advancement in Contemplation After having practiced for a while, you may find your contemplation considerably improved and that you are able to prolong the basic exercise of noticing the abdominal rising and falling. At this time you will notice that there is generally a break between the movements of rising and falling. If you are in the sitting posture fill in the pause with a mental note on the act of sitting, in this way: rising, falling, and sitting. When you make a mental note of sitting, keep your mind on the erect position of the upper body. When you are lying down you should proceed with full awareness as follows: rising, falling, and lying. If you find this easy, continue with noticing these three sections. Should you notice that a pause occurs at the end of the rising as well as the falling movement, then continue in this manner: rising, sitting, falling, and sitting. Or when lying down: rising, lying, falling, and lying. Suppose you no longer find it easy to make a mental note of three or four objects in the above manner. Then revert to the initial procedure of noting only the two sections, rising and falling.

While engaged in the regular practice of contemplating bodily movements you need not be concerned with objects of seeing and hearing. As long as you are able to keep your mind on the abdominal movements of rising and falling it is assumed that the purpose of noticing the acts and objects of seeing and hearing is also served. However, you may intentionally look at an object, then simultaneously make a mental note, two or three times, seeing. Thereafter return to the awareness of the abdominal movements. Suppose some person comes into your view, make a mental note of seeing, two or three times, and then resume attention to the rising and falling movements of the abdomen. Did you happen to hear the sound of a voice? Did you listen to it? If so make the mental note of hearing, listening while it is happening, and having done so, revert to rising and falling. But suppose you heard loud sounds, such as the barking of dogs, loud talking, or singing. If so, immediately make a mental note two or three times, hearing. Then return to your basic exercise of attending to rising and falling. If you fail to note and dismiss such distinctive sights and sounds as they occur, you may inadvertently fall into reflections about them instead of proceeding with intense attention to rising and falling, which may then become less distinct and clear. It is by such weakened attention that mind-defiling passions breed and multiply. If such reflections do occur, make two or three times the mental note, reflecting, and again take up the contemplation of rising and falling. Should you forget to make a mental note of body, leg, or arm movements, then mentally note forgetting, and resume your usual contemplation of the abdominal movements. You may feel at times that breathing is slow or that the rising and falling movements of the abdomen are not clearly perceived. When this happens, and you are in the sitting position, simply carry on the attention to sitting, touching; if you are lying down, lying, touching. While contemplating touching, your mind should not be kept on the same part of the body, but on different parts successively. There are several places of touch, and at least six or seven should be contemplated. Some of these points are where the thigh and knee touch, or the hands are placed together, or finger to finger, thumb to thumb, closing of the eyelids, tongue inside the mouth, or lips touching together.

## HOW TO COPE WITH LAZINESS

Up to this point you have devoted quite some time to the training course. You might begin to feel lazy after deciding that you have made inadequate progress. By no means give up. Simply note the fact, lazy. Before you gain sufficient strength in attention, concentration, and insight, you may doubt the correctness or usefulness of this method of training. In such a circumstance, turn to contemplation of the thought, doubtful. Do you anticipate or wish for good results? If so, make such thoughts the subject of your contemplation, anticipating or wishing. Are you attempting to recall the manner in which this training was conducted up to this point? Yes? Then take up contemplation on recollecting. Are there occasions when you examine the object of contemplation to determine whether it is mind or matter? If so, then be aware of examining. Do you regret that there is no improvement in your contemplation? If so, then attend to that feeling of regret. Conversely, are you happy that your contemplation is improving? If you are, then contemplate the feeling of being happy. This is the way in which you make a mental note of every item of mental behavior as it occurs, and if there are no intervening thoughts or perceptions to note, you should revert to the contemplation of rising and falling.

During a strict course of meditation, the time of practice is from the first moment you wake up until you fall asleep. To repeat, you must be constantly occupied either with the basic exercise or with mindful attention throughout the day and during those night hours when you are not asleep. There must be no relaxation. Upon reaching a certain stage of progress in contemplation you will not feel sleepy in spite of these prolonged hours of practice. On the contrary, you will be able to continue the contemplation day and night.

## SUMMARY

It has been emphasized during this brief outline of the training that you must contemplate on each mental occurrence good or bad, on each bodily movement large or small, on every sensation (bodily or mental feeling) pleasant or unpleasant, and so on. If, during the course of training, occasions arise when there is nothing special to contemplate upon, be fully occupied with attention to the rising and falling of the abdomen. When you have to attend to any kind of activity that necessitates walking, then, in complete awareness, each step should be briefly noted as walking, walking or left, right. But when you are taking a walking exercise, contemplate each step in three sections, lifting, moving, and placing. The student who thus dedicates himself to the training during day and night, will be able in not too long a time to develop concentration to the initial stage of the fourth degree of insight (knowledge of arising and passing away) and onward to higher stages of insight meditation.

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