

Meditation, What and How

by Rebecca Dixon

Alameda Sangha, March 31, 2019

Welcome. Tonight I'm going to talk about what meditation is and how it works. No small subject, right? When I started meditating in 1993, almost everyone I mentioned it to thought it was kind of weird. Now almost everyone either does it or thinks they ought to. What they think meditation is, however, can vary widely.

The Buddha was often asked to compare what he taught to the huge number of other kinds of meditation that existed even way back then, just in India. The Buddha consistently answered that what set the practice he taught apart from other approaches was that his was the only one that led to the end of suffering.

That wasn't to say there is no other way to end suffering. People stumble upon enlightenment occasionally. Sometimes it sticks and they either share it with others or keep it to themselves, probably thinking they could never make others understand. The Buddha's teachings are distinct because they are all about abolishing dukkha from our lives, and because they lay down the Path we can follow to do that.

This may come as a surprise, but meditation isn't *the big part* of that Path. It's essential, as are all the other parts of the Path, but it's only the last 3 of the 8 parts, in what's called the Practice section of the Eightfold Path. Meditation needs to be informed and shaped by the beginning and middle of the Path in order to take us where the Path leads. Just meditating as if it's not part of the Eightfold Path, just a nice way to relax, is fine. But it's not what the Buddha wanted to share with us so much that he devoted the rest of his life to teaching it.

This talk is therefore relevant to the Eightfold Path course I've been teaching, as well as what happens to be on the sangha's schedule for tonight. Next week the course starts on Wise Effort. We'll have a short 'month' to practice with Wise Effort, and ironically that's the one that needs the most time to really see how it works. That's why the Practice Guide for this coming week – #5 on Wise Livelihood – introduces some exercises in practicing Wise Effort, which I'll talk about much more next Sunday. You can get those exercises for this coming week on our web site's page for the course.

To understand what Wise Effort is, it helps to see how mindfulness and concentration work. They are the mental faculties that let us use Wise Effort to end suffering. You could say that, by themselves, neither mindfulness nor concentration can "do the trick" of ending dukkha. But we have to have them in order to use Wise Effort to do it. Working together, these three aspects of Practice uproot from our minds the mental habits that directly cause or create the conditions for our suffering.

You could think of mindfulness and concentration as your two arms. One does most of the work but needs the other to do almost all of it. Wise Effort tells them how to do it. These three parts of Practice actually work together always, even in deepest concentration. Maybe it's best to think of them as the major aspects of the process of training the mind to achieve liberation.

A lot of students think concentration, just focusing attention on the breath, is what meditation is all about. When they're guided to pay attention to the rest of the body, they ask, "How can I watch the breath *and* be aware how my jaw feels?" Attention focused on one object is just a part of mindfulness. Just a part. We need to cultivate it to have the clarity and spaciousness necessary to establish mindfulness, but if we stay in a state of single-pointed attention, that's not mindfulness. Yes, it calms us down and that's very nice. But there's much more to be gained that requires the broader field of attention in mindfulness.

I guess this is the right time to point out that the term mindfulness has been defined in so many ways, with many of them so unrelated to Vipassana, or Insight Meditation, that some Theravada teachers don't want to use the term. Thanissaro Bikkhu calls mindfulness, "a faculty of active memory, adept at calling to mind and keeping in mind instructions and intentions that will be useful on the path." Trudy Goodman, the Founding Teacher of InsightLA, says, "If we look at the Pali canon and the Abhidharma definitions of mindfulness, there are eighteen elements or factors of mind that support mindfulness." Concentration is one of those.

Like everything else, mindfulness is not a static thing at all, but a process, and an active one. We start by establishing a calm, clear and focused attention; that's concentration. We usually do this by watching the breath. What we want is the level of concentration we need to study for an exam, or to take that test. This level of concentration allows us to notice any distraction and go right back to the matter at hand. So we recognize we're thinking, and then return to the breath. When we can do these two things – recognize and return – fairly easily, then we have enough concentration to put mindfulness to work. That work is to look into the mind and understanding how it generates dukkha, and then end it, according to the instructions in Wise Effort.

You could say that the deeper we're looking into our minds, the more concentration we need. Like in a hospital's imaging department, there are different devices for looking inside the body. You start out with a gizmo that rolls around on your tummy using ultra sound, and go up to these massive devices they roll *you* into for procedures we identify with letters like CT and MRI because who knows what the whole words mean?

The uses for intense, sustained concentration are hard to explain and it could be counterproductive to try because humans have such a strong tendency to tailor their experience to fit what they expect to happen. So advanced practitioners usually talk about their work with stuff like the jhanas in generalized terms, except privately with teachers. Bikkhu Bodhi's book on the Eightfold Path outlines for us the progression of concentration through the jhanas. Then he mentions "momentary concentration," the practice of staying aware of the "constantly changing stream of events." I'll just add that when you're ready to do these practices, it's best to proceed with a teacher's guidance.

As I said, once you establish enough concentration for *mindfulness*, you're able to look around inside the mind. Part of your attention keeps checking in with the breath, and the rest is exploring other things going on in the mind. The breath functions a little like theater curtains. If you keep them in the corner of your eye, no matter how engrossing the show is, you'll always be aware that it's a show you're watching. And you won't get swept away by it. So we can watch thoughts happening by staying mindful.

Another analogy some people find useful is snorkeling – you stay connected to what lets you keep being here – oxygen for snorkeling, attention to the breath for mindfulness – and then you can proceed to poke around. Now you're all set, but for what *purpose*? Our purpose comes straight from the first part of the Eightfold Path, Wise Understanding. It's about suffering, what causes it and how it can be ended. We form Wise Intention to reduce suffering as much as possible for ourselves and for all beings, then with Sila, or the Ethics part of the Path, we practice it in our lives and really come to understand it.

That bring us to Wise Effort, and I use the word "wise" primarily for this part of the Path. Another Pali word often translated as wisdom is *discernment*, or the capacity of the mind that lets us know what something is, to identify and qualify it. In short, we use Wise Effort to identify what mental states cause dukkha, or reduce it. The former are unwholesome and the latter are wholesome. Then we use Wise Effort to decrease the wholesome mindstates and increase wholesome ones. To do this, obviously we need to put forth some effort, in the common sense of the word.

The "exertion" aspect of Wise Effort is simple to explain but a bit tricky to practice. While we're meditating, we don't want to overdo the "efforting," a helpful made-up word that means we're trying too hard. It's when we're being so active about this mental work that we tire the mind out, till it can't "see" clearly, or we overshoot the mark. We want to try hard *enough*, though. To find the right balance we just have to get the feel of it.

At this point I want to emphasize the way these three parts of the Path are integrated. The right amount of each depends on which kind of practice we're doing. If you want to eliminate

the primal cause of suffering, the delusion of self, at its deepest root, that take a lot of concentration and just a hint of guidance in the form of Mindfulness and Wise Effort. If you want to identify your most troublesome mental habits and diminish their control over you, that takes just enough concentration to be Mindful and to follow the directions of Wise Effort.

Those directions are four-fold, summarized by Thich Nhat Hahn as, “water the flowers, not the weeds.” What he calls water is the energy of our attention. If someone spends all day fantasizing about getting revenge against people, they will become a miserable, hateful person, with an ever stronger tendency to continue this habit. So we want to use the energy of our attention more skillfully, and become progressively *less* prone to having dukkha, or setting up the causes and conditions of other people’s suffering.

Wise Effort gives us four ways to guide our attention so we become better and not worse. We can *avoid* the causes and conditions of our own suffering – staying clear of “triggers.” Someone watching their calories with a weakness for chocolate, for example, knowing that the smell of chocolate chip cookies will trigger greed for them, will either avoid places where they know they’ll be exposed to that fragrance, or steel themselves ahead of time not to impulsively get and eat the cookies. That’s how we avoid the arising of unwholesome mind states. If we’re already in a dukkha-filled mind state, like revenge, we end it, by turning our attention away from it. I plan next week to share some more strategies for this.

Another way to reduce dukkha-making states of mind is to cultivate better options. Wholesome mind states are generosity, lovingkindness, compassion, equanimity, joy, interest, faith, determination, etc., etc. We want to turn our attention to these often, as a regular practice, encouraging them to develop so we have them when we need them. We also want to sustain them, for the obvious reason that they make us happy. They give us greater control over where our attention is drawn.

So you see, Effort, Mindfulness and Concentration are all involved in each of these situations, just in different measures and with different objectives. They’ve been labeled and discussed so we can recognize and use them, but they function together.

When a teacher talks about doing this or that in your practice, you’re being introduced to one of many techniques that you can use to free yourself from the suffering caused by your mental habits. You don’t have to use them all each time you practice. Your mindfulness will use Wise Effort to apply the technique best suited to deal with what arises in your practice. But do try to learn the skills teachers offer you. Then when they seem to be right for what you choose to do, you can apply Concentration, Meditation and Wise Effort to them.

Thank you.