

# **Meditation, Insight and Rationality**

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# Part I

For millennia, the practice of meditation has been deeply intertwined with many of the world's major and minor religious and spiritual traditions, as a technique aimed at everything from developing magical powers to communing with gods and demons. By contrast, during the last few decades in the West, enthusiasts have promoted meditation (along with a variety of its secularized offshoots) as a good way to cultivate relaxation, creativity, and psychological self-improvement in the context of our hurried and stressful lives. Because of this variegated cultural history, it's no surprise that many people see it as either as an exercise that leads to irrationality and madness, or as a harmless but questionably-effective pop science fad—sometimes both at once!

Set against this backdrop, small and somewhat private groups with an interest in meditation have long gathered together in secret to discuss and learn. Not satisfied with the popular dogmas, they got down to figuring out, as best they could, whether meditation really leads to anything that could be called “enlightenment”: by experimenting on themselves, comparing notes with others, seeing where it led them, and seeing whether it would repeatably lead others to the same point. Because their subject is taboo, they have labored in the shadows for a very long time; but the modern mass-adoption of the internet has allowed what they know to reach a widening audience. And while they fought for years to discover these things, you now have the opportunity to hear about them merely for the cost of your internet connection—for some of you that may be a blessing, but guard your minds so that it isn't also a curse.

Before I begin, there are three caveats:

1. The perspective I'm going to present is one most closely associated with Buddhism, and you may be inclined to ask “Is this a good description of what Buddhists believe?” or “Is this what Buddhism

is really about?” or even shout “This doesn’t sound like Buddhism to me!” The relation between this material and Buddhism is an interesting topic (and I’ll discuss that in Part 2), but for now, I make no claims whatsoever. This material draws enormous inspiration from particular strains of Buddhism, and one may argue that it is a highly plausible interpretation of what Buddhism is ‘really about,’ but in the end it stands or falls by itself.

2. What is declassified on the internet is still taboo in many communities. If you walk into your local dharma group / meditation center / Buddhist sangha or what-have-you and start asking about enlightenment or talking concretely about your own meditation experiences and what you think they mean, you may not get the response you’d expect. Having warned you, my conscience will remain clear...even so, don’t be a jerk, and please recognize that not everyone who appears to be interested in meditation wants to hear about these things.
3. What follows is the best attempt at writing this information up in a way that I think suits the LW community. No one besides me is to blame for any shortcomings it has.

## **Why meditate?**

You may take up or have taken up meditation for all kinds of reasons. It may help you to relax, it may help you to think clearly, and it may even help you to fit in with your New-Agey friends and the alternative lifestyle crowd. But one of the best reasons to start meditating is so that you can stop being deluded.

Delusions come in many kinds, and the right medicine for one may be ineffectual for another. Some things called delusions are merely misinformation, and melt away in the light of evidence. Other types of

delusions stem from mental illness and can be vanquished by therapy or medication. The common practices of rationalists are well-suited to eliminating delusions that spring from cognitive biases. The sane human mind is generally quite good at representing and then talking about these cases: you can call yourself out on these types of delusions, or failing that, someone else will call you out. If you disagree with their assessment, you at least can expect to understand what's at stake in the disagreement.

But there is another way to be deluded, in which you can't easily understand what it means to be deluded in that way. For the purpose of crafting a simple metaphor, think of beliefs, thoughts, various cognitive representations, etc. as tangible objects in the factory that is your mind, and think of the various cognitive transformations that your mind is capable of as industrial processes that take these objects as inputs and produce others as outputs. So, via one process, these objects can be looked at, via another their properties can be manipulated, or further objects can be generated as a function of the properties of the inputs; ultimately, all objects are either put to further use in-house as inputs to other processes, or marketed to consumers (= behaviors in the external world) at some point. Most processes are simple, but others are sophisticated (second-order) and can assess the ways that different inputs and outputs make the factory's gears grind differently, and adjust operations to compensate. If the outputs are built to spec, all's well; malformed outputs are either rejected on the market or gum up the works when used in-house, depending on what they are and what they're supposed to do.

There are lots of simple ways that factories can run badly: the processes are obsolete, there aren't enough doo-dads available when the machinery requires doo-dads to run, or someone puts sprockets in the chute clearly marked "COGS ONLY". But there are also systematic ways that production can be inefficient.

Suppose that some processes take objects and project their image, via a lens, onto a photosensitive site that controls the specifications of whatever that process outputs. If the lens is sufficiently good, there's no problem. If the lens

has severe aberrations...well, it depends. Some processes may not be sensitive to the distortions that the lens imposes, so there is no practical effect. Other processes will output different objects than they otherwise would have due to the lens' distortion. Those malformed objects may be destined for the market, where consumers may or may not be sensitive to the malformation, or they may be inputs to other processes which are not sensitive to the malformation. But for those processes that ARE sensitive to it...if THEIR malformed outputs feed into processes that are also sensitive to it...and THEIR outputs do as well...there's a potential for some serious industrial mishaps.

How would you, the factory owner, assess whether such a problem exists? Perhaps there's a camera that feeds into a CCTV display in the main office, and you could have it point at the objects being generated, inspect them, and make an assessment. If you see that the objects are not built to spec, you can inspect the machinery, and, finding the junky lenses, replace them. Sounds good...unless...the camera was built in-house with a lens that also produces a distorted image. That's a more complicated problem.

If the camera's image looks distorted on the screen, you can always stop the production lines and take a look with your own two eyes, bypassing the camera and its problems.

Unfortunately, there is no homunculus perched on a chair somewhere in your brain, waiting to spring into action. In our metaphor, the camera's image is input for a second-order process, perhaps a rudimentary AI meant to regulate overall production, cobbled together by some sloppy but effective evolutionary process outside the factory. How likely is it for the AI to consider the possibility of a distorted camera lens? Suppose it's so unsophisticated that it does not even understand that the camera's output is a representation of anything, but assumes the output is direct access to the thing-in-itself? (Imagine that it does not even know that there is a camera, and is built in such a way that it receives the camera's output with the tag "WHAT'S GOING ON AT COORDINATES X,Y,Z" and nothing else.) If it has

no primitive concept of data representing something, and the process by which it receives data from the camera is completely opaque to it, then it may be quite oblivious to the fact that there even is a problem. Even if it responds to natural language, you can type “MACHINES X AND Y ARE MALFUNCTIONING AND THE CAMERA BY WHICH YOU OBSERVE THEM IS MISLEADING YOU!!!!!!” on the terminal all day with no guarantee of making headway.

To fix the problem, the AI needs to be adaptive enough to find a way to conceptualize it in the first place, and, depending on the idiosyncrasies of the evolutionary process that built it and on the degree to which that process selects for AIs that happen to be good at factory control rather than something else, the ways by which it might recognize that there is a problem so that it forms the relevant concepts to deal with it could well be limited.

Welcome to the human condition.

## **Building new concepts.**

Here’s a stylized story about how the AI might manage to figure out that some of the machines it watches over, along with the cameras by which it watches, have lenses that produce distorted images, and these images are leading to production problems.

Suppose there are multiple cameras it receives data from, and the AI, for whatever reason (perhaps an unintended consequence of something else it’s doing) directs them both towards the same machine. Lo and behold, two sources of information tagged “WHAT’S GOING ON AT COORDINATES X,Y,Z” are not identical! How strange. Perhaps from this and some adaptive inference it figures out that what representation is and that these data merely represent what’s going on at coordinates X,Y,Z. If the camera lenses are only moderately distorting, the AI may point one camera at the other, match the image it sees to an image of a camera in its database, and by doing so, manage



to peek into the black box that produces the data by which it monitors the factory. And perhaps now it has an inkling of an idea that, since production has been slower and more problematic than expected, that means something is wrong, despite the fact that all the data it has access to do not allow it to pinpoint any particular problem: because, as it now knows, the data could be inaccurate.

From here, there are various ways that the AI could discover that something is wrong with the camera lenses. If the distortions aren't uniform over the image the lens produces, it could rotate one camera, un-rotate the output, and see that this is not equivalent to the previous output from an un-rotated camera. Or, knowing the layout and dimensions of the factory, it could aim both cameras at the same location, transform the data from one camera so that in theory it would match the data from the other (given the known positions of the cameras as well as the machines on the factory floor being looked at), and yet find that they did not match. Now it can infer that at least one representation is inaccurate.

Since the factory makes lenses in-house, to test the hypothesis that one of the cameras' lenses is faulty, the AI could replace one camera's lens with a different one (of unknown quality), and depending on how clever it is and how much it knows about optics, try to work out what the lens aberrations at issue here are. If the malfunctioning machines are the ones that produce lenses, there may be multiple rounds of producing lenses with different kinds or degrees of aberrations, inserting them in the cameras, inspecting the machines, modifying the machines, building new lenses based on the modifications....successively getting closer to the point where it has enough data from the various distorted images it's collected to have managed to produce a lens of sufficiently high quality to

- Accurately observe the previous defective camera lenses,
- Reflect on how those lenses led to faulty information about the machines and their outputs,

- Accurately observe the malformed outputs of the machines,
- Accurately observe the defective lenses inside of the machines,
- Discover the details by which the defective lenses are leading to malformed outputs,
- Deduce a lens design that will not lead to malformed outputs, and
- Build and install such lenses.

## What's wrong with your mind.

Understanding that it's an oversimplification, the preceding metaphor is a very good one for describing how human minds works by default with respect to what meditation is good for. Some cognitive processes within the mind have defects that yield distorted outputs. And the second-order processes that evaluate how the first-order processes work are themselves defective, yielding more distorted outputs. All these distorted outputs are fed back into various cognitive processes, where they muck up effective operation in all kinds of ways.

If I tell you about the defects in your own mind, it is unlikely that you will understand (really understand) what I mean. The first-order processes may be messed up and I could describe that to you, but when you attempt to introspect on their status, the image of those processes that you see is itself distorted. Further, you may not have even developed a concept by which you could understand what the distortion is, or even what it would be like for the outputs of your first- and second-order cognitive processes to be distorted or not distorted in the way I mean. So we would be talking past each other.

This post was inspired by [Skatche's](#). He writes, parenthetically,

“[...in] the Buddhist system...the unenlightened mind can't truly understand reality anyway, so you'd best just shut up and meditate.”

This is a common impression people have. It's also more or less true. Not because enlightenment is some wild, indescribable altered state of consciousness which people mistake for a glimpse into 'reality,' but because the unenlightened mind probably can't even begin to conceptualize the problem, and definitely doesn't have the tools with which to understand it with sufficient clarity. 8-year-olds typically can't grok higher mathematics, not because mathematicians are tripping balls, but because 8-year-old minds don't have the tools to grasp what mathematicians talk about, and don't have the concepts to understand what it is that there's not grasping. C'est la vie.

I'm sure you want to hear what the big deal is anyway, so here you go. Your first-order cognitive processes that take experiences as objects are malfunctioning, and output bizarre things such as 'attachment,' 'craving,' and 'hatred.' The second-order cognitive process that monitors them is malfunctioning, and can't see what is so bizarre about those outputs ("aren't these built to spec?"). The same process, when monitoring experiences, outputs bizarre things such as 'Self' (and many variations on it). When it takes itself as an object to see its own inner workings, no output is produced, and a function call to the rational inference module asking what process outputted 'Self' yields a variety of confabulated answers (typically 'the senses' or 'rational deduction,' and claimed to be built to spec). When high-level cognitive processes take 'Self' as an object, the outputs are more bizarre objects: for example, 'existential angst,' 'Cartesian dualism,' and so on. From then on, the lives of these malformed objects are variegated: 'existential angst' as an input for the poetry generation process yields a product roundly rejected by consumers, 'attachment' and 'existential angst' as inputs for the life-goal planning process yields questionable long-term plans, and 'Cartesian dualism' as an input into the philosophy of mind process causes a blue screen of death.

All this happens without you batting an eye, and yet if you reflect in a very general and nonspecific way on whether all these malformed objects are helping or hurting your functioning, and helping or hurting your everyday behavior, you may be able to see that, at least in some ways, they're gumming

up the works. But can you see what's wrong with them? Aren't they built to spec? Don't you need them in order to lead a normal life?

You may be quick to say that you have a perfectly good meaning in mind when you say 'Self.' Either 'Self' is a matter of definition and can be defined innocuously, or better yet, describes the behavior of biological systems in a useful and accurate way—[carving reality](#) at the joints. So it is not a delusion, and anyone who says otherwise is...well...deluded.

Well, bull. You have at least two concepts, Self and Self. *What you are describing, what carves reality at the joints, is Self*, an output of the rational thought process. Because your lens distorts, Self and Self\* look indistinguishable to you. When you make a function call to ask what process outputs [Self or Self\*, since they look the same to you], the answer you invariably get is 'rational thought.' "See," you think, "no delusion!" as you happily feed Self into the processes that generate attachment, craving, hatred, existential angst, etc. etc. from it, even when Self\* is not an input that would produce those outputs.

The rationally-derived concept Self that you use doesn't and couldn't play the role in your mental machinery that it seems to. When you were young, before you were mature enough to form the concept Self, *you had attachment, craving, and so on. Today, you still do. How likely is it that Self* is responsible for those things right now? When you feel, deep down in your bones, that you want something—sex, drugs, money, status, friendship, happiness, anything—what is the 'you' who appears to want it? Self\*? Knowing what you know about human minds, human development and comparative neurophysiology, is the 'you' who appears to want it the kind of thing that is likely to be the output of a rational process?

Think about it. See if you can begin to form a new concept that better captures what could be going on in your mind.

This metaphor is just illustrative. If it doesn't make sense to you on some level, I know of no argument that will be able to change that. If, for example,

you have the intuitive feeling that you are a homunculus experiencing the output of your brain and yet rationally know that that's not true, the tension between the two may be a starting point for you. Or if you've had experiences where your sense of self was altered in radical ways, you may be able to see that there's more to the way you normally conceive of the world in relation to you than first meets the eye.

But it isn't irrational for this not to make sense. If it doesn't make sense, you simply haven't built the right concepts and tools yet to allow it to make sense. Being ill-equipped is not a matter of irrationality. It's a simple problem that you can solve if you're motivated to.

Whichever case best describes you, I claim you can build the concepts and tools you need to understand this through meditation. If you're interested, you can do the experiment yourself, and see what happens.

## **How meditation works.**

Meditation, at least meditation for the goal I've described, can be thought of as a series of attentional and perceptual exercises. Experience has shown that directing your attention and perception in particular ways will help you to begin to see the ways in which your cognitive machinery is distorted. As in the metaphor, you eventually need to build new lenses in order to get a handle on what's going on, but luckily, you don't need to know their specs or retrofit your cognitive machinery; if you do the exercises, neuroplasticity will handle those parts for you.

EDITED FOR CLARITY: There are a range of "attentional and perceptual exercises" (= meditation styles) that are effective, but it important to note that not all are especially effective, and more importantly, a couple tend to work really well compared to the rest. Common kinds of meditation instructions, such as "relax, follow your breath, and cultivate equanimity towards whatever thoughts arise without getting involved with them", are

unfortunately not the kinds of instructions that have an especially good track record among typical meditators. At least with respect to attaining the kind of insight under discussion. Such instructions do seem to work very well for helping people to be relaxed and less overemotional, though. More details in Part 2.

Experience shows that doing the exercises will cause your mind to generate various new lenses with different aberrations (there are various ways to categorize how many different types), and as your mental processes adapt to the output that these aberrations engender, you gain more and more data with which you can piece together the ways in which these distorted outputs have misled you. When you have enough data, your mind is able to produce a lens that is strictly less distorting than everything that came before. Retrofitting everything with this new type of lens makes your life better, and it makes the exercises easier. As you continue the exercises and cycle through new lenses, eventually your mind is able to repeat the feat, and make a lens that is strictly less distorting than in the previous case. On and on.

The first time you generate and use a lens that is strictly less distorting, you are partially enlightened.

When you have generated and installed a lens that does not distort in ways that lead to attachment, you are fully enlightened.

These results do not depend on any effort to maintain, and they are not altered states of consciousness. The goal of this type of meditation is not to produce any particular mental state, but to fix your cognitive machinery. When it's fixed, it's fixed. Experience has shown that no maintenance is required.

Unlike what popular mythology says, this process need not take a lifetime, or half of a lifetime, and definitely doesn't require that you live on a mountaintop in the Himalayas. Bearing in mind that individual variation exists, contemporary methods can yield deep and powerful cognitive upgrades along these lines within a few years. Many people are able to reach

what is considered to be the first partial stage of enlightenment within months, in the context of a dedicated and regular practice during their daily life, and this is not considered especially atypical.

## **Benefits.**

The reasons you might pursue this kind of mental upgrade are individual—just as in every other case. I don't have THE REASON that this is important for you to do. But here are a selection that you as an individual might find compelling.

- Be happier; function better.

When you begin to cut off the automatic generation of attachment, craving, hatred, etc., those things get used less as inputs to other mental processes: your life will likely become a more fun, more carefree, and more worthwhile experience. As you begin to cut off the generation of the concept Self by second-order processes, it gets used less as inputs to higher-level cognitive processes: you will think more clearly about existential issues of all kinds.

- Know what your goals would be if you were more insightful.

It's easy to think about what you want, and build a plan for your life around what you think you want. But your ability to know what you want is curtailed by the fact that you have delusions about what 'you' means. If you begin to get rid of the delusions by beginning to cut off the flow of Self into various processes, you will be in a better position to decide on how to live your life. Imagine you could get a pre-Friendly AI glimpse into CEV; might that change your current goals? What would a glimpse of your own, private extrapolated volition be worth to you? What would you do to get such a glimpse?

- Be more rational.

As you do the attentional and perceptual exercises involved in meditation, you develop a less and less distorted view of your own mental processes. This eventually allows you to fix any processes that are systematically malfunctioning due to the want of non-distorting components. But as a side effect, it also lets you see an enormous selection of what's going on in your mind: lots of things that you might not have previously noticed, or that you would have previously called "subconscious," may become effortlessly clear to you.

Suppose you are biased against non-degreed people, and one day, a high school dropout tells you something that you currently disbelieve. If the thought "he doesn't know anything, he has no education!" arose in your mind, you might not normally even notice it, or you might delusively attribute the thought to 'you' and then be invested in acting according to it and defending it (since it's 'yours,' or since 'you' thought it). As your mental processes snap into focus, it's much easier to see the thought, and regard it as 'a thought' rather than 'my thought' or 'my belief' or 'mental content I generated'. When your mind can't sweep it under the carpet and yet you have no special attachment to it, it is easy to face it explicitly and decide how to work with it. If you already have the motivation, accounting for and dealing with your own cognitive biases is likely to become much simpler and easier than before.

- Understand the origin of delusive intuitions.

One example. Many people have the intuition that they have free will, i.e. that they are homunculi controlling their bodies and minds in a way that is outside the normal laws of physics. Even those of us who know better may still have that feeling. Meditation can ultimately eliminate that feeling. Undercutting the intuition and seeing where that leaves the rational case for free will, from a first-person perspective, may be very informative for understanding other cases in which your intuitions are misleading you by corrupting your rational thought.



- Understand the limits of your own conceptual apparatus.

The space of potential minds is huge; the space of human-like minds is a tiny subset of it. You may believe that your human mind cannot really conceive of what other potential minds would be like if they were sufficiently different, but do you know that in your bones? The result of meditation is a mind that is well within the space of human-like minds...but you will not be able to imagine what having that kind of mind is like until you have it. That puts potential alien minds and AIs, or rather, your ability to imagine them with any sort of accuracy, into perspective.

## **Risks.**

It is extremely important to realize that the process of replacing the lenses of your mental processes can lead to intense mental turmoil, potentially severe enough that it impacts your ability to function effectively for weeks, months, or even years. This does not happen to everyone, and it need not be severe when it does happen, but you should consider the degree to which you're committed to this before you start. I would recommend not starting at all unless you are willing to see it through and not give up just because it seems to have made things temporarily suck: experience has shown that giving up while things suck is a great way to make things suck for a long time. (And experience has shown that commitment helps to avoid this problem.)

It is also important to realize that this is an experiment in self-transformation. Past a certain point, there is no going back, and no undo button. As a matter of informed consent, you need to know that the style of meditation that leads to the goal I've described can and will change the functioning of your brain, permanently. Lots of people have found these changes worthwhile. That doesn't mean there's no need to think about what you're about to do before you do it.

More information forthcoming in Part 2. (Perhaps next week.)

## Addendum.

I have made all kinds of claims in this post, some of which may be seen as wild, reckless, unfounded, unargued-for, and so on. Certainly I'm not doing very much hedging and qualification. The really remarkable thing that communities interested in this kind of human development have discovered is that people who work at meditation long enough will reliably and regularly say the same kinds of things, in the same order; and people who have stumbled onto the exercises that lead to this kind of development outside of these communities will also, reliably and regularly, say the same kinds of things (although some translation between cultural frameworks may have to go on first). Further, I have not known anyone to suffer from a deficit in rationality or in the ability to observe and assess themselves by practicing meditation in the way that leads to this kind of development. So my working hypothesis is:

- Certain styles of meditation lead to bona fide insight, and there is a consensus on what that insight is among people who meditate in those styles; anyone with the same cultural background (e.g. contemporary Westerners) who takes up meditation is likely to experience that insight and describe it a way that is broadly similar to everyone else's description, whether or not they are primed to do so by the discourse of the communities of which they are members.

I hope that exposing readers of Less Wrong to this information will help me to confirm or deny this hypothesis. More importantly, I'm also sharing the information that I am because I hope that learning about it will ultimately help people to benefit personally from it, as I have.

Also, please note that my metaphor of a factory is just a metaphor, intended to be intuitive and helpful, not intended to be anything like a precise and

thorough description of how minds work or how meditation changes how minds work.

Finally, this was written as a blog post, not a final draft of a formal article. Criticisms related to tone and style are especially welcomed. And apologies in for the length of the piece, as well as any formatting issues it has (I have little experience with effective formatting for blogs.)

## Part II

I have already given a brief overview of what the goal of a particular style of meditation is, and why some individuals in this community might find it beneficial to pursue. The basic structure of this article will be as follows: a brief restatement of my major claims, a highly abridged history of meditation in one Buddhist-associated tradition and of models of the path towards enlightenment (from its ancient Buddhist roots to the modern day), and then a short-but-explicit set of instructions which an interested individual can use to see for themselves whether this style of meditation leads to what I have claimed it does.

### **My basic claims from Part 1:**

- The human mind, by default, involves cognitive processes that are fundamentally defective, and which distort one's views about how things are; the result of such processes is a collection of various delusions.
- Due to the distortions these processes cause, neither introspection nor attempts at rational thought / armchair philosophizing reveal them.
- The distortions these processes produce are so severe that, without training, it is unlikely that one will even be able to conceptualize what they are, or what it would mean for the assertion that one's cognitive processes are distorted in this particular way to be true or false.
- Because of this inability to conceptualize the problem, there are no words I can type which will serve to explain it to you (what I would intend to convey with them is a meaning which you cannot entertain; whatever you think I mean is almost certainly not what I

mean). The best I can do is say that it has something to do with the way you think about your ‘self’.

- Meditation, a series of attentional and perceptual exercises, can lead to the end of these delusions by fixing the processes which generate them. The end of these delusion is called ‘enlightenment.’ These delusions are ended in steps; the various steps are called ‘partial enlightenment.’
- Enlightenment is not an altered state of consciousness and does not require any effort to maintain. Enlightenment is a permanent change in the way one’s mind functions.
- These exercises have been studied, practiced, and refined over millennia, though the knowledge so-acquired has not been freely available until recently due to social factors.
- The exercises that most people call ‘meditation,’ which are typically taught to people in contexts ranging from stress reduction to quasi-religious instruction through Buddhist- and Buddhism-associated groups, have been found not to be very effective for this purpose.
- A rigorous implementation of the exercises that have proved to be effective can reasonably be expected to lead to enlightenment much more quickly than you are likely to expect: years, not decades. [Clarification: There are also individual factors at work here which I don’t think anyone really understands yet.]
- As delusions are shed, a person may experience numerous changes in the functioning of their mind, which they are likely to find valuable if their goals include “being happy” and “being more rational.”

## **A highly abridged history of effective Buddhist-styled meditation, from a contemporary secular perspective.**

The man whom we refer to as the Buddha lived around 500 BCE and taught various forms of meditation to those who were interested in pursuing enlightenment. His followers collected and preserved his teachings, first as an oral tradition, and later in written form. The written collection is formally called the ‘sutta pitaka’ in Pali; I say ‘the suttas’ to refer to the teachings in general in the form in which they’re currently preserved.

The suttas describe various ways in which enlightenment is reached. The most common formulation is that a meditator will pass through four altered states of consciousness in sequence (called ‘jhanas’), and after having passed through the fourth, they will grasp the truth of things and their delusions will be extinguished. The suttas also contain other formulations, some of which are elaborations of this (e.g. eight altered states of consciousness instead of four), and some of which are not (e.g. people reaching enlightenment through certain kinds of intellectual reflection, directly hearing the Buddha’s instructions, certain ways of regarding the content of experience, etc.). The suttas describe four stages of enlightenment (the first three being ‘partial enlightenment’ and stepping-stones on the way to full enlightenment) but there is much less detail on how they come about in relation to the progression-through-four-jhanas theory.

Around 400 CE, Buddhaghosa wrote a book called the Visuddhimagga, which is ultimately adopted as the orthodox view that characterizes Theravada Buddhism. (Theravada Buddhism is the form of Buddhism most common in Southeast Asia, and which hews closest to the suttas compared to all other currently-extant forms of Buddhism.) According to the Visuddhimagga, there is an attentional exercise called (roughly) ‘concentration,’ the application of which leads to the aforementioned altered states of consciousness, and there is an attentional exercise called (roughly) ‘discernment,’ which is along the

lines of what I describe in the next section. In order to reach enlightenment via meditation, one develops and improves the capacity to execute these two exercises, in various manners and with varying amounts of emphasis on one or the other (according to the capabilities and inclinations of the meditator). [Modern scientific research often taxonomizes forms of meditation as ‘focused attention’ or ‘open monitoring’, which may or may not be derived from an inaccurate understanding of the Visuddhimagga’s instructions regarding ‘concentration’ and ‘discernment’.]

In the 20th century, a Burmese monk in the Theravada tradition (Mahasi Sayadaw, 1904-1982) is taught, practices, and subsequently popularizes a style of meditation which many people discover to be extremely powerful and effective. In his tradition, the progression-through-four-jhanas theory is reconciled with what the Visuddhimagga says: the path to enlightenment is modeled as a progression through four basic modes of perception, which manifest in varying ways due to personal factors and the extent to which a meditator has developed the capacity for and applies ‘concentration’. The four basic modes of perception are further divided into sub-modes (eleven relevant sub-modes in all). Having passed through all the sub-modes serially, one reaches partial enlightenment; repeatedly passing through them all eventually leads to full enlightenment.

Contemporary practitioners have further refined the previous model of meditation, by further subdividing the sub-modes of perception, and making some astute observations about the ways in which modes and sub-modes present cyclically and the ways in which they can be developed and manifest outside of meditation in everyday life. (More about the latter two claims later in this post, and in Part 3). Some important revisions are made to the model of partial enlightenment with respect to how one makes progress from partial enlightenment towards full enlightenment. Contemporary practitioners are also responsible for producing the viewpoint that leads to this abridgement, in the following sense:

- This abridgment leaves out an enormous amount of information relevant to Buddhism; orthodox Theravada Buddhists who seriously practice meditation would recognize the descriptions I give, but probably say that the descriptions are highly biased towards a particular view of meditation and enlightenment which they do not share, and that I leave out an enormous number of important things (the orthodox religious dogma, first and foremost) which are crucial to a full understanding of what meditation and enlightenment are about. Theravada Buddhists are also likely to disagree amongst themselves about the extent to which Mahasi Sayadaw's writings (or contemporary Burmese Theravada Buddhism in general) are faithful representations of the Visuddhimagga or of the suttas, which only adds to the list of grievances they would have with my abridgement.

## **How to meditate if you want to be enlightened.**

What follows is a simplified description of one style of meditation which has been shown to be extremely effective, along with a simplified model of where one is along the path to partial enlightenment, and what to do about it. This style of meditation emphasizes the development of 'discernment' rather than 'concentration,' though both will be developed to some extent. The simplifications are my own, and they draw heavily on my own meditation practice, the experiences and knowledge of others, and "community knowledge."

A major focus of this method is to develop an acquaintance with what are called 'vibrations.' A meditator practicing in this style will eventually find that their experience is not static, but 'vibrates' or fluxes in a peculiar way over extremely short periods of time (fractions of a second). For an explanation by analogy, imagine a set of speakers playing music without



dynamic variation; if a person rapidly turns the volume knob in the pattern off-low-high-low-off, the amplitude of the music will flux over time. Similarly, a meditator practicing in this style finds that the components of experience are not static, but fluctuate rapidly from nonexistent to existent and back again. N.B. This has nothing to do with the fact that the contents of experience are constantly changing. Rather, apparently static objects (e.g. an unchanging white visual field) turn out to be in flux.

The analogy only goes so far. Unlike music whose volume is being manipulated, recognizing that experience is made of ‘vibrations’ rather than static objects is not in itself disorienting and does not in itself affect one’s ability to keep track of or make sense of or appreciate one’s experience. A discussion of why is unimportant, but a person who takes up this style of meditation will discover for themselves the fact that it does not have these effects, and may get some intuitive sense of why. Another dis-analogy is that this fluxing appears to be tied into the mental process of attention, rather than presenting purely as a property of sensory experience.

The orthodox view is that these vibrations are related to ‘impermanence,’ according to Buddhism one of the three characteristics of everything that exists. A science-inspired view is that this style of meditation develops one’s attention to the point that one can directly observe an artifact of the way that attention is implemented and interacts with sense data and cognitive content in the brain. In context of practicing meditation, the true explanation does not really matter; what matters is that experience has shown that developing the ability to perceive vibrations is an important step towards enlightenment and so you had better do it.

As an interesting aside, there is a common belief that meditation works by reinforcing ways of thinking and feeling, and their continued reinforcement slowly biases one’s everyday experiences towards those ways of thinking and feeling. For example, one might believe that a meditator cultivates pleasant feelings and learns to vanquish unpleasant feelings, and eventually pleasant feelings become more common and unpleasant feelings are easily done away

with when they arise. This appears not to describe how meditation aimed at reaching enlightenment works. In the style being described, one will do practices that develop attention and perception, but at the end, when attention and perception have become sufficiently precise and clear, something completely unexpected will dawn upon the meditator...specifically, that they have been laboring under delusions which are caused by the inability to see clearly. Now that they see clearly, they unexpectedly and permanently reap the cognitive and emotional benefits of not being deluded in the ways they were. The practices that develop attention and perception are, by contrast, not especially interesting or useful in themselves. Unlike meditation aimed at generating pleasant experiences, one needs some degree of confidence that the development of attention and perception leads to a good outcome, since their development is unlikely to be valued in itself.

To recap, there are four basic modes of perception which are of interest in the context of meditation. These modes of perception can manifest in distinct and profound ways during intense meditation, but also can and will manifest during everyday life in subtle and unremarkable ways. Each has typical characteristics related to the width of one's attention, the frequencies of vibrations which present themselves, and the cognitive / emotional content which tends to appear. When you sit down to meditate, you generally begin in the first mode, and slide upwards to the last mode that you have ever reached; continuing to meditate at the "edge" of the last mode you have reached allows you to progress to the next mode once you have put in enough effort and allowed your brain time to rewire. In general, once you reach a particular mode of perception, you are able to reach it again with much less effort (it is difficult to regress, especially if you meditate regularly, though it is possible). The stage you are at is determined by the highest mode you can easily reach. Therefore, there are four basic stages before partial enlightenment.

## Stage one.

This is where you begin if you try to meditate, have never meditated before, and have no ‘accidental aptitude’ for developing your attention and perception outside of formal meditation, nor have personal factors which predispose you towards having developed your attention and perception without ever having made the explicit effort to. N.B. This means that some people, for whatever reason, will not start here, even without any formal meditation experience.

Typical qualities of mode one perception: Very narrow attentional width (if you “tune into” one sense you “tune out” the others“; if you”tune into” part of the content of one sense [e.g. a visual object in front of you] you “tune out” all the other content of that sense [e.g. your peripheral vision]), vibrations are subtle, various cognitive and emotional content but nothing very extreme aside from physical unpleasantness.

Goal: Develop attention sufficiently to focus on an object without one’s mind wandering much; learn to distinguish different kinds of experiences; develop the ability to perceive vibrations clearly.

Basic method: Sit down in a place where there are few distractions, and pick an object to focus one’s attention on. The most popular objects are the feeling of breath at the tip of the nostrils / upper lip, and the motion of the abdomen as one breathes in and out. (In this description I’ll assume you’re using the latter.) Begin by trying to clearly perceive the feeling of the abdomen expanding and contracting; when it expands and you perceive it clearly, attach the label ‘in’ to that perception, and when it contracts and you perceive that clearly, attach the label ‘out’ to that perception. As your attention becomes more stable and precise, you can divide the experience up into as many parts as you can discern: for example, ‘in’->‘holding’->‘out’->‘holding’, or further, ‘in-beginning’->‘in-slowness’->‘holding’->‘out-beginning’->‘out-slowness’->‘holding’. The label you use is not important so long as it’s simple and makes sense to you. What is important is attending to the perception, and the best way to do this is by attaching a label to the perception every

time you notice it clearly. Focus on perceiving every aspect of the movement of your abdomen as precisely as is possible for you, given your current level of attentional and perceptual development, and on keeping your attention as set on the movements of your abdomen as possible given the same. When you get good at this, try to incline your mind towards the attentional / perceptual flux called 'vibrations' in the experience of your abdomen moving. Try to see how, in the experience of attention being fixed on an object, it is continually being set and re-set there. After enough practice, they will make themselves apparent.

Whenever your attention goes to anything other than your abdomen, attach a label to the accidental object of attention and then go back to your abdomen. If you wonder about how effective the exercise is, believe it's easy, believe it's hard, decide it's pointless, congratulate yourself for how you're doing, etc. etc., label it 'thinking' and go back. If you think about your day, your future plans or responsibilities, etc., etc., also label it 'thinking.' If you visualize what you're going to do after meditation, etc. label it 'imagining.' If you have the desire to move, label it 'restless.' If you form the intention to move, label it 'intending.' If you feel some emotion, label it appropriately: 'happy,' 'sad,' 'enthusiastic,' whatever. If your attention wanders off for a long time, when you regain it and realize that, label the whole daydream or reverie 'wandering' and put your attention back on your abdomen. If you hear a distracting noise, label it 'hearing.' Anytime your attention is not on your abdomen, whatever it's on, recognize that it's not on your abdomen and is instead on that thing, label it, then go back.

General advice:

- Keeping your attention on your abdomen, or any object, is extremely hard for beginners. Do whatever you can to avoid falling into a slothful state or a daydream. Meditate with your eyes open, meditate standing, drink a lot of caffeine, sit in an uncomfortable position, whatever it takes. 'Try to relax' or 'don't get caught up in your thoughts' is good advice, but for many beginners it is

counterproductive because it leads to too much relaxation and not enough sharpness of attention, where attention fails to stay on any object. Try to get caught up in the process of attending and labelling. Relax insofar as it helps you do that. If feeling like you're working hard and making an effort helps you do that, don't relax.

- Many people try to pay attention to their abdomen but actually pay attention to a visual image of their abdomen in their imagination, an abstract image of their breath, or other things along those lines, without recognizing what they're doing. Sensory experiences are one thing, and mental experiences that imitate sensory experiences are another. Distinguish them. If you're not distinguishing them, you're not perceiving them as precisely as possible. (This is hard, but it's good to aim at.)
- If you can observe something, it is an object of experience. Keeping this in mind can be helpful depending on the extent to which the experiences you label seem like they're about 'you' or are 'yours' (e.g. intentions seem more 'yours' than visual imagery) and the extent to which you fail to label experiences because you can't see them as experiences but instead see them as 'stuff I'm doing / thinking about'. Your thoughts and reflections and reactions are bona fide mental objects, no different in this way than instances of seeing or hearing. For the purposes of meditation they ought not to be given any special privileged status. Think about this carefully, and review it from time to time to make sure you haven't forgotten.
- The goal of this exercise is not specifically to feel pleasant. If you don't feel good, that is irrelevant. Your success is measured by whether your attention stays on an object, and then, whether you perceive vibrations.
- The goal of this exercise is not specifically to experience a distinct altered state of consciousness. If your concentration is good then

you may. If not, it doesn't matter as long as your attention stays on an object and you perceive vibrations.

- You will probably feel pretty lousy at times, either because your life is making you feel that way or because meditation is making you feel that way. Re-read the previous two points.
- Try not to think about why this works, or to think about anything in particular. Just attend and label. Do it as mechanically and efficiently as possible. Try to let other mental activity fall away due to disinterest.
- Beginning meditators sometimes suffer from what I call 'meditation hangover,' where, once attention is set on an object, it takes their minds some time to revert back to normal functioning once they stop meditating and go about their everyday business, and until that happens they feel sluggish or dissociated. This is a problem, but it goes away in time as the practice makes your mind more flexible. If it's a problem for you, schedule meditation when it won't interfere with whatever you have planned for afterwards.
- If you can't figure out how to label an experience, just pick a generic label and move on. Don't get caught in a loop wondering about what label to affix to something that happened five seconds ago. If you can't decide on a label, go with 'that.' Keep your labeling as immediate as possible.
- If you think you're able to keep your attention on your abdomen for more than a short period of time, you're probably wrong and simply not able to discern all the cognitive and sensory stuff that's distracting you. Despite that, this is probably a sign of doing well.
- Label as fast as you can.

- When you get to the point of being able to perceive vibrations, you are doing well; at that point make observing vibrations in your abdomen the focus of your efforts.
- All else being equal, the more you meditate, the faster your attention and perception will improve. Working up to one or two hours per day, every day, is a good goal.
- If you meditate as if your head is on fire and meditation is the only way to put the fire out, that is probably worth more than doing it half-assed for longer periods.
- Some people worry that this practice reinforces the self of a 'self' watching or observing the contents of experience, even though meditation aims at ending that particular delusion. This is irrelevant. It may reinforce the sense of being the observer of one's experience (who else labels things but 'me,' the observer?), until attention and perception are developed sufficiently that such a sense is undermined. Trust the process. Try to have a measure of confidence in the claim that you are deluded because you can't see clearly, and refining your attention and perception will help even though it may not be clear why or how.

## **Stage two.**

If you've done the basic method in stage one successfully, you will eventually get here.

Typical qualities of mode two perception: slightly wider attentional width, vibrations are obvious and often perceived effortlessly, potential for extreme shifts in mood and energy towards the positive end of the spectrum; potential for surprising or detailed spontaneous visualizations or mental imagery, potential for highly physical / sexual / pleasurable sensations, potential for all kinds of egocentric biases (in the everyday sense) concerning one's

capabilities, moral worth, etc., potential for ‘missionary behavior’ concerning meditation because it seems like meditation is so fun, pleasant, effortless, etc. and everyone else would enjoy it if they would only do it, potential for generic [hypo]manic behavior (such as high sex drive, low need for sleep, etc.).

Goal: Observe vibrations without any special regard to the content of the experience that they comprise; spend enough time observing them that it becomes effortless; try to observe them so precisely that you will be able to see an extremely high number of them per second.

Basic method: Approximately the same as with stage one, except that meditation is typically much easier and effortless here, many of the admonishments and bits of advice can be put aside. If you can simply attend to any aspect of your experience and perceive vibrations in it, it is sufficient to attend and perceive them. If you get lost or your attention falls off, you can go back to observing your abdomen and labeling things until it recovers. Try to attend fluidly and effortlessly, as if the only thing you would like to do is indifferently observe your experience. Again, let mental activity that isn’t concerned with observing vibrations (and possibly with labeling experience) fall away due to disinterest, as much as you can. Try to be indifferent towards the content of your experience (e.g. if you visualize Buddha vibrating at 10hz, pay attention to the fact that the image is vibrating at 10hz and not the fact that the image is Buddha or that you like or dislike the visualization). Observe very precisely and rapidly. Don’t feel obligated to stay with your abdomen if you can more easily observe vibrations in some other aspect of your experience. (For example, I find the visual field, on the back of the eyelids or with eyes open, to be very good for this.)

This stage manifests in a variety of ways that typically mimic hypomania, and in extreme cases can mimic mania with psychotic features. If a lot of crazy stuff presents itself to you and you find it disturbing, remember that it is not atypical for this stage and will eventually go away. If you have intense visualisations or hallucinations, just label it ‘seeing.’ If you feel like you’re



going mad, label it ‘thinking.’ If you feel like meditation is the greatest thing and that you’d like to preach about its benefits, also label it ‘thinking.’ If you think “I must be enlightened!”, definitely label it ‘thinking,’ and feel free to label it ‘delusion’ also, because you’re far from it.

If this is your first time passing through this mode of perception (which doesn’t include people who have without ever having made the explicit effort to meditate), it is likely to alter the way you relate to your own sense of self, and you are likely to find that you have a better intuitive grasp of issues in philosophy of mind due to that alteration. This is likely to be permanent.

It is highly typical for the end of this stage to involve extremely strong physical rushing sensations (“energy”) throughout the body. They can be extremely sexual (like the biggest orgasm you’ve ever had), possibly paradoxically pleasant and unpleasant at the same time, and can somehow distort your sense of self or constitute a very short-lived bona fide altered state of consciousness. When they occur, they can make you feel as if you’re losing your identity or your volition as they temporarily take over your experiential world. Observe that they are comprised of vibrations and try to see them as precisely as you can. The number of vibrations you may see may be very high, like 20 or 40 per second, so don’t aim too low. If the experience is too extreme to keep your wits, then just submit to it without fighting and without worrying about where your identity or volition will go.

### **Stage three.**

If you ever get to stage two, it should be easy to get here, because the characteristic mode of perception in stage two is enjoyable and makes you want to keep observing your experience. My advice is only likely to make it happen faster. In stage three, the characteristic mode of perception tends to be unpleasant, so it is possible to get “stuck” because you may be inclined not to observe your experience. Read closely, commit what I’m writing to memory, and resolve to keep meditating no matter what.

Typical qualities of mode three perception: attentional width is very diffuse (as if you can see a lot of your experience at once, but none of it especially clearly), some vibrations are fast while others aren't, vibrations tend to change frequency less often, 'discord' between vibrations in the experiential field, potential for moodiness, low energy, depression, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and all kinds of other unpleasantness.

Goal: Observe vibrations. Attend to a wider swath of your experience than before, even if it feels like your ability to perceive it is clouded or muddled. If you feel terrible, label each and every such feeling. If you ruminate about how terrible you feel, label each and every such instance of thought. Whatever terrible experiences arise, see them as objects of experience, or better yet, as vibrating objects of experience.

Basic method: Like a cross between stage one and stage two. Vibrations should be easy to see, but unlike in mode two, observing them tends to be unpleasant, so some of the advice from stage one needs to be re-read and applied. The new element here is that attention is much wider than usual, so make peace with that (don't try to constrain your attention by focusing on your abdomen and trying to tune things out) and attend to experience in a way that accords with that width. The types of experiences here are different than before, so be sure to see them as clearly as you can.

General advice:

- Now is a good time to step up your meditation practice, so as to get out of this stage as soon as possible and not have it bleed over onto the rest of your life. Investing as many hours as you have to spare is a good idea.
- Like in stage two, observe vibrations, ignore content. If you have the experience of anxiety, observe that it's vibrating at 7hz, and not that it's anxiety or that it sucks. Don't focus on the content of your experience. - Don't ruminate on the content of your experience. If you can't help but do so, try to focus on relatively uninteresting

experiences. Mode three perception often involves unpleasant body sensations, which are easier not to get caught in the content of than unpleasant thoughts.

- Using the metaphor of the volume knob on speakers being turned in the off-low-high-low-off pattern, Vibrations in mode three perception tend to be indistinct with respect to all but the second half of the pattern: (high)→low-off. Experiences appear to be constantly fading away. This is why perception seems clouded or muddled. Pay very close attention to this feature of perception.
- Mode three perception often involves new kinds of feelings that warrant labels such as ‘dissociated’ or ‘off-balance’ or ‘out-of-sync.’ Use those labels. However, make sure you are very clear about what precise thing in your experience is getting the label. In other words, make sure you can pinpoint exactly what the experience of feeling dissociated consists in if you’re going to use the label. Try to “face” the experience instead of throwing a label in its direction and hoping that it hits. Look very closely. You may find that doing so gives you a new understanding of what experiential objects a variety of words concerning negative emotions actually refer to. Re-read the previous point.
- In this stage there may be a tradeoff between speed of observation and precision of observation. Emphasize precision over speed. Re-read the previous two points. Try to be clear on the variety of things your experience contains. (“Clearly perceiving” is not the same as “feeling like one is clearly perceiving.”) Actively use labels for everything (as if you’re a beginner in stage one again and don’t know what vibrations are) if it helps.
- The more you meditate, the worse you are likely to feel. Feeling worse is a sign of progress. Learn to embrace it.

- If you feel terrible even when you're not meditating, remember that you feel that way because you're in stage three and not because people are aggravating, because you hate your boss, because your significant other isn't a good match for you, and so on. Mode three perception manifests in everyday life in this way. Try not to act on beliefs that involve judgment of other people in relation to you and your life unless you're sure that those judgments are valid. Even if you're sure, try not to act on them anyway, because there's a good chance you're wrong.
- It helps to have someone to talk to if you're really feeling down.

This stage manifests in a variety of ways that typically mimic mild depression / anxiety, and in extreme cases can mimic depression with psychotic features. If the content of your experience starts getting crazy, the advice for dealing with crazy experiences in stage two applies here. If you visualize grinning skulls eating corpses, label it 'seeing.' If you feel like life is pointless and you can't go on, label it 'thinking.' If you think that this practice will extirpate your sense of self and you won't be able to function without it and will be condemned to a psychiatric ward, label it 'thinking' or 'delusion'. And so on.

The more into this stage you get, the worse it tends to be, so don't be discouraged if nothing you do appears to be helping.

Keep in mind that there are lots of individual factors involved and your experience may only be mildly unpleasant. That is not atypical either.

Also, keep in mind that if you stop meditating altogether at this point, mode three perception (with all its negative content) is likely to become the subtle undercurrent of the rest of your life. That is seriously bad. Please don't do that to yourself. Please resolve, if you get to stage three, that you will keep meditating until you get out of it.

## Stage four.

The contrast between stage three and stage four should be rather big. One typical manifestation of the very beginning of stage four is boredom or a feeling of blandness. So don't expect to immediately feel relieved when you get here, or to think "this feels so much better than what was happening before!" Recognize stage four by the fact that you've stopped feeling terrible, and your attention is both wider and clearer than before. It will not necessarily 'feel' like there is a big contrast; simply recognize that there is one.

Typical qualities of mode four perception: attentional width is such that you can see very large amounts of your experience and it seems rather clear (rather than muddled), vibrations are regular and slowly become synchronized, feelings of boredom and indifference that eventually turn into peace and equanimity, ability to perceive subtle aspects of experience that were previously indiscernible.

Goal: Observe your experience in a wide, diffuse way. Attend to all the subtle aspects. Don't ignore any aspects of experience just because you've never really reflected on them before or don't know what they are.

General advice:

- Try to observe as much of your experience at the same time as you can. Don't push beyond what you can do; simply try not to tune things out. Emphasize breadth over speed. Vibrations should be obvious; keep an awareness of them in the background as you focus on breadth. 'Peaceful' is a feeling. 'Neutral' is a feeling. Label them and any other way you may feel.
- As you get deeper into this stage, it may occur to you that there have always been experiences that you have never properly recognized as mental objects. For example, 'intending,' 'making effort,' or 'willing' may suddenly seem as if they're truly on the

same footing as ‘seeing’ insofar as they are just experiences and not ‘yours’ or ‘generated by you’ or ‘descriptions of your agency’. This is good. Observe them clearly and label them.

- As you get deeper into this stage, many subtle objects may present themselves for which the appropriate label is not obvious. Often these will ultimately be given labels such as ‘spaciousness’ or ‘nothingness’. Don’t worry about what to call them, just make it a point to call them something and see them clearly.
- Deep into this stage, you are likely to have the sense that what you call ‘self’ is just a mental object which appears to be the observer of experience, but which you are paradoxically observing. You won’t resolve the paradox by thinking about it, so just observe that object precisely and label it ‘observer.’ [N.B. There is actually no mental object ‘self’ in experience, but the way in which that is true is not one that can be explained to you, and in any case is something for you potentially to discover in the future.]
- Deep into this stage, you may fall into an altered state of consciousness in which your ability to reflect is suppressed. Don’t worry about it. Perhaps try to cultivate this altered state by letting up on your efforts while trying to stay minimally attentive to what’s going on. This is more likely to be effective when you are currently experiencing signs of being deep into this stage as described in the previous few points.

After the fireworks of stages two and three, this stage may incline you to think that meditation no longer works, and nothing interesting is really happening. It begins in an unassuming way, but ultimately develops into an experience characterized by enormous attentional width, peace, ease, the effortless ability to see all experiences as objects, and a plethora of subtle objects to observe. At the very end you may temporarily lose the ability to distinguish between your various senses. (This is not synaesthesia, but simply a change that involves objects being seen as ‘experience’ rather than being

categorized by the particular sense they manifest in.) The distinction between the senses may seem arbitrary or artificial. Just keep meditating.

The rest of your life is likely to benefit from having mode four perception as its subtle undercurrent. Problems may seem less important and typical worries may no longer arise. If you stop meditating here, it is possible to do fine, but it is also possible to eventually regress to stage three (in which case mode three perception becomes the subtle undercurrent), which sucks. So try not to let that happen.

Partial enlightenment is preceded by the apparent momentary cessation of consciousness, which will happen at the very end of this stage. Some people find it very profound, in that they now have a radically different understanding of ‘self’ and of their own mind. Other people find it to be a natural evolution of what they already have developed, and so do not find it to usher in an enormous new paradigm. My working hypothesis is that, the more steeped in Buddhist dogma and belief one is, the more likely it is to be seen as natural. (If “all phenomena are not-self” has been resonating in your mind for years, understanding what it means is likely to be less shocking.) If you get to this point, write a post on LW and let us know what you think!

It is sometimes hard to be sure that you have experienced an apparent momentary cessation of consciousness. One ‘test’ is simply to see whether you suddenly have a different perspective on things. Another ‘test’ is to consider which of these cases applies to you:

- The unenlightened meditator in stage n will sit down to meditate in mode one perception, and slowly slide to mode n perception, where they will stay.
- The partially enlightened meditator will sit down to meditate in mode two perception, slowly slide to mode four perception, experience an apparent momentary cessation of consciousness, and then return to mode two perception. This can be repeated numerous

times. The cycle from mode two to mode four and back to mode two is highly likely to happen even without meditating.

After partial enlightenment, at first the various modes of perception will present strongly, and the rapid transitions may be somewhat disorienting, but eventually the brain manages to integrate these various modes of perception and they become rather unimportant, and their emotional and cognitive peculiarities taper off. The subtle undercurrent of one's everyday experience may slowly shift to perceptual mode four.

Enlightenment has no qualities. It is not a feeling of apathy, detachment, a trippy altered state of consciousness, or a constant stream of awesome vibes. Partial enlightenment is partially like enlightenment. Do not expect all your emotions to be gone and everything good to be sucked out of life; do not expect to find an endless fountain of joy inside of you. Actually reaching partial enlightenment may make it extremely clear to you how silly these expectations are; but despite that, people have them, and so I have to say something about them.

Partial enlightenment is good in itself, but I would not be able to explain why. Review the first post in the series for some of my claims about the incidental benefits of enlightenment, which are easier to explain.

It helps to know someone who is experienced with respect to this style of meditation and these four stages, but if you have no one to talk to, you can do it by yourself if you have enough commitment and can follow instructions. You will get better advice on how to finesse your way through these various experiences from a person, because they can tailor what they say to your particular experiences and your personality, and because there is immense individual variation in how minds work which needs to be accounted for when giving advice. Also, there is an enormous amount of useful advice which will help many people in meditation, but trying to stuff it all into a blog post would be absurd. Remember that the model and advice in this post is a condensed version of a much larger model and much more exhaustive advice.



I include one general piece of advice at the end, because I don't know if it's true, but I think it is. That advice is, if there is some aspect of experience which is suddenly especially interesting or strange to you, that aspect of experience is worth focusing on during meditation until it becomes less interesting or strange. For example, if you are in stage one and it appears to you that your intentions are not leading to action in the way you normally expect, that is worth paying attention to; or, if you are in stage four and are fascinated by the perception of 'nothingness,' that is worth paying attention to.

Getting from partial to full enlightenment is not necessarily harder (though it generally is). Good advice for how to do it is definitely much harder to summarize and can be highly individual. The process is approximately akin to the process that first gets you to partial enlightenment, but not really. If you get to this point and want to go further, you should find someone to talk to about it.

Don't forget that being partially enlightened is not the same as being fully enlightened. You are still deluded. Assume that you still don't really know what enlightenment is about, even though you may have a much better idea than before. Don't stand on a pulpit and tell people what it's about unless you are extremely confident that you know and that further meditation won't change your mind, taking what I just wrote into consideration.

If you are psychologically unstable or suffer from mental illness, please read the descriptions of stages two and three carefully, consider the ways in which they might exacerbate the problems you are already dealing with, and make an informed decision about whether to proceed. If you do decide to proceed, make sure your plan includes ways to deal with these stages safely. And get a doctor's approval and supervision before beginning any of this, whether or not you have pre-existing problems, since I'm not a doctor and not a dispenser of medical advice. You follow the technique I describe at your own risk.

## Addendum.

Now you know how to meditate. Secret knowledge has been revealed to you. If you're interested, test it for yourself and see whether what I have written is true. If you have not done these practices and never observed someone else do them and their results, you have minimal evidence with which to judge the truth of my claims. Perhaps one source of evidence for you will be what other LWers say after trying these exercises themselves. Keep in mind that it takes a variable amount of time to reach partial enlightenment, though if you have a committed practice, a year is a good upper bound. If you have been practicing for awhile and not seeing much, get feedback; you may not be following the instructions even though you think you are. One of the benefits of contemporary communities is that openness and feedback about meditation may have reduced the amount of time it takes to make progress, so take advantage of that feature.

The way that common descriptions of how to meditate go wrong is as follows. Beginners' minds are inclined by default to do everything other than cultivate their attention and perception in a way that leads to results. (If it were otherwise, most people wouldn't be beginners when they start meditating.) Generic instructions such as "follow your breath and don't get caught up in your thoughts" lead to beginners' minds doing a wide variety of different things. (Such instructions are not specific enough to constrain what their minds do or guide them towards developing attention and perception in the right way.) Because of the fact that the prevalent culture of groups interested in meditation in the West involves norms of not talking about one's experiences in detail, not talking about enlightenment as a goal, and not criticizing other people's meditation methods, meditators are never given any way to gauge their progress or any means by which they would recognize and correct their own failure to cultivate their attention and perception. Compounding this, many meditation groups are interested in mood and stress alteration rather than enlightenment, and are not aiming at

developing their attention and perception, and so many people never hear that there is something worth cultivating through meditation apart from relaxation and detachment from negative thoughts and feelings. The style of meditation I describe avoids these problems by 1) coming pre-packaged with a model of how to reach enlightenment, 2) focusing on developing the perception of vibrations and then observing them, which has been shown to be a way that gets people to cultivate their minds in the right way, and 3) providing a way to test whether they have (i.e. “can you perceive vibrations?”)

I am not claiming that no other style of meditation is effective or is as effective as this one, or that any effective style bears striking similarities to this one. My claim is that this style is highly effective and easy to teach. My personal belief is that it is a member of a family of closely-related meditation styles which are the most effective known styles for teaching contemporary Westerners, but establishing that convincingly requires data to which I don't have access.

In Part 3 I shall include criticisms and arguments against my claims, reflections on science with respect to their interest in and models of meditation, and some specific things which contemporary communities who study and practice this stuff believe about meditation which would have significant consequences for the practice of clinical psychology and for people's everyday mental health if they were true. And perhaps some other things that I haven't yet thought of. (If there are specific issues anyone would like me to address, please write them in the comment section and I'll see if I can work them in.)

# Notes

## Source

This e-book is a compilation of the following texts written by [DavidM](#):

- [Meditation, insight, and rationality. \(Part 1 of 3\)](#)
- [Meditation, insight, and rationality. \(Part 2 of 3\)](#)

Please note that Part 3 (although mentioned on the text) was never published.

## About this e-book

This e-book was created by [atrahhdís](#) using [markdown](#), [pandoc](#) and [calibre](#).

## Version

V 1.4 - 2020-01-25