# Centering

## Centering instead of Concentration.

People use the English word "concentration" for this, but a much better word is "centering". Centering gives the right idea of calming and centering. The word concentration in English implies too much effort, especially for retreat practice. You don't need to try hard on retreat. You need to simply be with your experience in a direct and intimate way. Trust that it will happen if you stay with your experience.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/view_message/17349762))

## Insight into what Jhanas actually are.

Jhanas are the mind looking for a refuge within seclusion and renunciation. It starts off as gross bodily pleasure, but each of the first four jhanas in turn has a limitation which doesn't satisfy. First is interesting but too buzzy, second is satisfying but too sweet, third is blissy but too numb, four is wonderfully simple but there is still the tension of "a witness". So then the mind tries to find refuge/pleasure in aspects of the witnessing and knowing. Endless space feels spacious but the witness has a position, endless consciousness is full but has "knowing", nothingness is nothing but even that is something (it's nothing), and neither perception nor non-perception still has some kind of beingness that is recognizable by it being unrecognizable beingness.

All of the jhanas have allure because there is a kind of false refuge that seems possible. The self must find the refuge and it becomes more and more subtle. Just like all aspects of samsara, so to speak, has an allure because it promises a refuge in excitement, satisfaction, bliss, equanimity, space, consciousness, nothingness, indefinableness. Those things that make jhana seductive are what make samsara seductive if you look closely enough.

But this is simply this. So where is the problem? Why does there need to be a refuge?

So I mostly agree with the sutta that enlightenment is through "achieved through close and precise observation of and dispassion towards the jhanas and their factors". But my practice was somewhat weak in jhana, at least compared to others, but I could quickly understand how the glimpses of jhana basically exposed the building blocks of everyday samsaric experience, with jhanas giving clues to what those are. Once you can see how jhanas are a false refuge, samsara is clearly seen as a false refuge. And when the false refuge is understood, then the self-which-must-find-refuge is also seen for what it is. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/16799215))

## Forcing attention.

Forcing attention on breath by willpower basically trains force. Usually when force is being applied, there are a lot of other feelings and thoughts which are being suppressed. When force is dropped, these feelings and thoughts can become very strong. But even that's okay, you get to see what the real nature of your current mind is. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/15763667))

## A gentler approach.

The gentler approach is to have the intention to stay on the breath, allow for both success and failure to happen, and when failure eventually happens (which of course it will, that's built into the practice, no big deal) --- then the important part of practice happens: noting what was so seductive to the mind. The important thing isn't to get a A+ in class for staying on the breath, it's to learn about how your own mind works. It's learning directly what seduces the mind, and once we know, we can't be very confused anymore. Over time, with the gentler approach, the mind will follow the intention and stay on the breath and it will be a much more sustainable. It won't require effort because your practice didn't require effort with the gentler approach. The mind can hold breathing in awareness without a big struggle. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/15763667))

## Awareness and counting of breath.

Awareness and counting of breath is a great practice. For what it's worth, a good, practical combination is:

(1) Awareness of breathing as the meditation object   
(2) Counting of breath as the meditation method   
(3) When the count is realized to be lost, "note" what is currently in the mind. What did you wake up to?  Sensations, emotions, or thoughts in mind? Note what is currently in mind. e.g. "planning thought", "discomfort", "frustration", "pleasure", etc.   
(4) Give yourself a mini congratulations that you woke up from distraction. Yea!!   
(5) Find the breathing sensations again   
(6) Count the breath again

The whole point of this method is to learn (over time!) how to gently center the mind around awareness of the breath and to sensitize the mind to "waking up" from distraction. Of course the mind has a mind of its own, so to speak, so you don't force this to happen. You're more like a parent watching a toddler learn to walk. The mind "learns to walk" on its own. And if you rush it or get angry or frustrated, you're just freaking out the baby!  Although this sounds like a simple practice, it puts you directly in touch with mindfulness and it greatly increases awareness -- don't underestimate it! ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5754279))

## Lack of Concentration vs Aversion.

Energy is one thing. It is okay to adjust by sitting up straighter and breath with more intention if there is too little energy/dullness. It's okay to relax and slump a little and breath more gently if there is too much energy/struggle.

But a lot of times what we call a lack of concentration is actually an aversion to what is happening. Concentration just means you are able to note what is happening, you can describe what is occurring. But often times we say there is a lack of concentration when all that is occurring is dullness, confusion, irritation, boredom, discomfort, distraction, lack of interest, daydreams, etc.

Meditation really takes off when you can become a newsroom reporter and just observe and note what is actually occurring. Then all hindrances actually become FUEL for practice, because you use the awareness of them AS your practice. No matter how crappy the sit, if you were there for it, it's a great sit. No matter if you get distracted 1000 times, if you come back from distraction 1000 times then you will have learned much more about the mind than if you were only distracted and came back once.

Meditation can be counter-intuitive at first. The quality of it is not judged in normal, conventional ways of good, better, best. Actually the worst sits are the best in a very real sense.

So don't worry much about how it goes. Just keep your consistent daily practice and stay interested in what naturally arises as you sit.

When you get to the point that you can actual investigate what it feels like to be dull, confused, irritated, bored, in discomfort, distracted, lacking interest, daydreaming... then a whole world opens up. You'll actually hope for hindrances to show up so that you can get a good look at them and be able to learn Mara's tricks, so to speak. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6184257))

## What Compassion is.

Compassion is technically the ability to be with someone who is in suffering, without projecting your own needs onto them. (Com= with, passion = suffering). It doesn't mean you suffer because someone else suffers, but rather you can be present and fully witness another's suffering. So no rescuer complexes, no borderline personality disorder, no repression, no projection... A first step in actually helping someone is just to be able to be present and understand their sense of reality. A lot of the time, that's what people really want, someone to be with who isn't also triggered. Just having someone there allows the person to accept and let go...

The compassion that happens through practice is mostly from going through your own shit and processing your own neuroses. It allows you to more easily recognize it in others, not get triggered by their baggage, and generally have a sense of what might help. You never really know if you can help someone though. It's as much up to them as up to you, and communication is never perfect, so there aren't easy 100% cures... ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/4116801))

## Meditation, Compassion and Morality.

This is how meditation does seem to work. By becoming aware and sensitive, we often become conventionally moral. The compassion that comes from practice happens the same way: more sensitive and aware of difficulty in our self, we automatically start noticing in others and have compassion. It's a much more deeper and resilient and mature kind of morality than just following rules.  And it has less repression and more flexibility: you simply know that a daily habit of added calories, numbing, and energy the body needs to devote to detoxification aren't worth it, but you probably also know that if eventually you have a drink sometime in the future, you're allowed to enjoy it and it isn't the end of the world.  It really is amazing how meditation evokes all of these changes, but without relying on repression or dogma. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/3139959))

## Noting, Metta, Tranquility.

Noting has a way of taking away the "I'm doing this practice" side of things that comes with other methods. You just note what happens. You don't care what happens, you just note what happens. That's a totally different attitude toward practice than cultivating metta, etc.

Metta has a way of taking away the "I'm special, only I feel this way" side of things. You notice how non-objective we are about our own wants and needs -- it feels like something that should drive our life, but actually everyone has the same kind of visceral desires and feelings of lack. It really takes off when it gets to the point where you say "wow, this is what shame feels like. Everyone that feels shame feels like this. Since I'm feeling shame anyway, may I take on the world's feeling of shame so that can be rid of it for a while. May it all come to me during this sit. May the rest of the world experience relief while I take on their shame”. That later part is "taking and sending" practice, which is a another form of metta.

Tranquility has a way of highlighting how we are our own worst enemy and make things needlessly complicated for ourselves. We sit and our only goal is to relax and be tranquil. Yet our stuff keeps coming up. Part of our mind notices the "ill-will" and it seems like part of our mind/body isn't affected by ill-will, so we go to the not-ill-will part of our experience with our intention. We sigh, we let go, we relax, we feel it. We go into that feeling of relief and it deepens... yet before you know it there is another ill-will -- the same one but stronger or weaker, or a different one -- that somehow became our focus of attention. So we repeat the process. This "letting go of ill-will" is a totally different training than the other two.

So I would go with the "do all three" approach, but just make sure you aren't switching around too early. Like a good workout, you need to get to your cutting edge and hang out there for a while, regardless of the specific meditation practice you are doing.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5131630)) 

## Metta is the heart of meditation.

Metta is the heart of meditation. If you can hold "the other" in your mind with a sense of goodwill, then the entire path of practice will simply unfold. Sometimes other is other individuals or groups of people, but other is also body sensations, emotions, and thoughts.  
  
It all comes down to becoming more and more sensitive to ways we have "ill will" toward reality and then -- not changing anything -- simply holding that ill will with a sense of goodwill. It's like welcoming a broken off part of the self back into the heart and mind, welcoming it back home.   
  
You'll find that it's very natural to have compassion toward our flaws, resistances, old wounds, fears, ill will. But it takes a certain faith and bravery to go into those experiences and really know them intimately. But once the intention is made to go into those experiences, it all unfolds very naturally. And each time metta is extended to something that was previously resisted, you can feel your sense of power and effectiveness increasing. It's a paradoxical situation where surrendering leads to empowerment, where embracing your ill will leads to even more goodwill. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5878174))

## Hypnosis: a dominance/submission mechanism.

My theory is that hypnosis makes use of the dominance/submission mechanism that makes children listen to parents. In other words, it's a kind of trance state where kids don't have free will, but rather follow parental direction. This mechanism makes evolutionary sense because a child would not survive without the parent until they are ~15 years old or so, so there has to be a "command voice" that is pretty powerful.

This mechanism also needs to somehow suppress cognitive dissonance. It has to work even in the case of really bad parents, because unfortunately, even bad parents will keep the child alive longer than if the child just ran off by themselves... So another aspect of the mechanism is the child will follow commands, even if the parent seems wrong or the direction seems wrong. The child somehow rationalizes the parent as "knowing what is best" and rationalizes the command as making sense. Which is why a hypnotic suggestion can make an adult be convinced that they are a chicken. I just googled, there are 99,000 video hits on "hypnosis act like chicken".

But hypnotherapy can also be used to help a patient become aware of aspects of their experience that they are otherwise ignoring, which can help induce positive changes in their life. For example, they can be made aware of the feeling of emotional emptiness that fuels binge eating and they can be made aware of the pleasures that come with exercise... which can help make permanent changes toward their eating habits and health.

In this case, a hypnotic trance is directing the patients awareness to aspects of their pathological trance which has been ignoring aspects of their thinking/behavior. Sort of fighting fire with fire.

I feel like there have been aspects of my meditation practice where I've used intentions to "self-hypnotize myself" to explore a particular aspect of experience... sort of like inducing relaxation and clearer perception through intention. Intentions are statements we make by ourselves and to ourselves... basically using the "command voice" on ourselves!

Ultimately, a well-developed human will have more conscious control of this inner "command voice" and will, in a sense, be able to command themselves, rather than relying on an external voice. I suspect that most adult are still susceptible to external  "command voice", In other words, the mechanism possibly never quite goes away during adulthood. This is all just my hunch. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/15725049))

## A blend of Concentration and Vipassana.

I never had super-pure samatha meditations, it was always a blend of concentration and vipassana. So when I encountered what you are experiencing I balanced doing two things: (1) gently feel for sensations of breathing at the nose; (2) gently notice the sense of "ill will" you have about what is happening (difficulty finding sensations, doubts, frustrations, etc.)

Notice how your mind tends to alternate between relaxing into the sensations of breathing and a different, more aversive and self-critical, mode. No big deal, that's completely normal. But when you notice the tone of "ill will" let yourself take a slightly fuller breath, feel that ill will, and kinda sigh, "ahhh...."

The point here is that you are training the defensive/survival instinct to relax a little and allow yourself to enjoy the very simple sensations of breathing. When ill will clouds the mind you both acknowledge that sensation and indend to relax a little. Don't try to push the ill will sensation away (that's more ill will!) but rather just acknowledge it but intend to soften it.

This kind of practice is very healing and is what is often needed for really being able to be present with the sensations of breathing. Even so, it's completely normal to drift in and out of attention on breathing --- that's why this is a training, a practice.

One last thing, anyone can stay on the sensations of breathing if they take the attitude "I'm going to crush my mind onto this object". Imagine a group a shoulder chanting in/out as they are breathing on a forced march --- sure you're aware of breathing, but it misses the point entirely. The point is to allow the body to breath naturally and to allow the mind to settle on the object naturally. Success is not how often you are on the breath, but rather the gentleness of the mind that rests on, slips off, returns, slips off, returns, etc. You are trying to train >instinctual< concentration, not brute effort. The technique to re-train our instincts includes lots of low-effort, high-repetition practice. You are training yourself to do it with just your intention, not effort, so be gentle about it, notice the subtle sense of ill will that goes with your judgement "this isn't happening right", and simply return to whatever sensations might be present. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6667462))

## Concentration and Vipassana aren’t so different.

The difference between Concentration and Vipassana isn't as big as it sounds like on the written page. That's what makes it hard to learn from a book or without feedback from other people. In both cases, you need to be aware of what is happening, in both cases you need to drop greed, aversion, and indifference to what is occurring. Both involve relaxation, seeing clearly, and acceptance.

In both cases, typically the felt sensations of breathing are used as a meditation anchor. Perhaps the main difference is that when doing concentration practices, as soon as a non-breathing-related experience is noticed, one moves back to noticing breathing sensations. In vipassana practices, it's okay to notice the non-breathing-related experiences for a while, as long as you maintain objectivity. As soon as a vipassana meditator notices they are caught up in a long string of discursive thinking, then they return to noticing breathing sensations. So vipassana includes more exploration of experience.

Notice that in practice this isn't a clear line, it’s more of a moving slider that you push more toward concentration or more toward vipassana. Many schools do not make the distinction and just let the student move the slider based on their own interest, curiosity, and instinct. Obviously to wake up, you need to both develop concentration and clear seeing, so no one with a good practice only does one or the other (despite what they might say!).

Here's the next level: notice how all of the above assumes that we are in control of our mind and attention? Is that true, or are we somehow watching all of this occur? It's possible to watch how the mind itself will focus on breathing sensations. It's possible to watch how the mind itself will get greedy for pleasurable sensations or adverse to negative sensations or be indifferent to neutral sensations. It's possible to watch how the mind will explore other non-breathing-related experiences. It's possible to watch the mind get caught up in a long string of discursive thinking. And it's possible to watch the mind come back from thinking/daydreaming trances and return to the meditation object.

In the paragraph above, you can see that the sense of "a watcher" is being developed. This is an important next stage in meditation practice. At first we start off trying to actively fix our mind by developing focus and attention. At a certain point, a meditator should notice how focus and attention "do its own thing" and actually are something we experience after it happens. This is a big insight! Once you see that we really don't control meditation, but rather have to go through what is already happening, then meditation really starts to do its work.

This might sound goofy or strange, but in reality is the same thing that every athlete in the world understands. You don't force or control the body in sports. You form an intention and let the body does its thing and you try to get out of its way. You stay aware of what is happening and the body itself learns over time what works and what doesn't. What happens is much more nuanced than our thinking mind. "I'm going to run faster" means nothing to the body, it's just our little worried mind trying to act like it can make things happen. To run faster you have to feel what running feels like and notice anything that feels like resistance. The body will want to drop that resistance but will need to learn how to become more coordinated, smooth, and efficient over time. It's at the level of body, not the thinking mind. Making an extra effort often gets in the way of high performance. You need to trust that your body is an amazing performing and learning machine and just spend the time doing the sport and letting the changes occur.

The same thing is true in meditation. At first you need to show up to practice and learn some basic skills. You have to get to the point where you have a consistent daily practice --- and that takes determination. But once it is a new habit, then you need to let meditation take on its own shape and lead you through what you need to go through. Everyone is different. That's why there are 10,000 different meditation practices/methods. But in all cases, it's about finding a practice that seems interesting enough to keep us on the cushion and productive enough to give us incremental progress -- whether it is greater relaxation, a purification of emotions, or interesting insights into the nature of mind itself.

"Progress" can be counter-intuitive, so we benefit from talking about our practice with others. The biggest problem we have is that we can become dogmatic about the practice method and what is supposed to happen during practice. But if we realize that for every meditator is is an interesting and personal exploration -- and no one has done it the same way -- then there is a lot more enjoyment and flexibility to focus on what we are trying to get out practice and to make practice work for ourselves. And if we start seeing 1) our own natural wisdom is working during practice and we can trust it, and 2) the main goal is always to see greed, aversion, and indifference clearly so that the mind will instinctively see it like a burning coal and drop it from our hand.

If we don't trust our inherent wisdom and don't clearly see how we lose equanimity and suffer because our reactivity, then we won't make much progress in meditation.

But if we have a sense of faith/trust/intuition and investigate how we resist what we experience, then those resistances drop away and we lose suffering and become profoundly joyful, even in difficult situations. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6184257))

# Insight

## What to get out of insight practices.

Conventional practices to find happiness are all about prefering one state to another and rejecting the bad one and going toward the good one. But the happiness found in meditation is making peace with all states --- profound equanimity --- while gently allowing practice to deepen -- by innate wisdom, not calculated cunning -- over time. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5914939)) 

## Meditation works subconsciously.

Meditation is a much different practice than anything that's conscious or intellectual. It works very subconsciously, outside of really being able to percieve the changes that are happening --- until the changes become big enough and then it's obvious. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6035595))

## The verbal mind is just another phenomenon of the body-mind.

When we are growing up, sometime around age 4 or so, we start talking to ourselves. ALL THE TIME. If you listen to kids, at a certain point they start narrating their life "I put this block here. The doll goes here. I go get the crayon..." As you are watching the kid, you might be tempted to say "you don't need to say everything you are doing. Just do it."  But it is part of developing the verbal mind.

The weird thing is that this odd behavior becomes so ingrained and pervasive in adults --- it becomes the verbally thinking mind. And 99% of adults are so identified with the verbal mind that they think that is what I am. I am my thoughts.

Meditation is usually the first time an adult starts seeing the verbal mind as just another phenomenon of the body-mind. Like you said, you can actually "watch" the mind be tumbling around in thought. Sometimes people call this "glimpsing the mindstream". The interesting thing about this state is you can't really "think" about what you are seeing, because that would be more thoughts, but the witnessing/awareness aspect of the mind can start to see thoughts as thoughts.

This can be shocking, but thoughts have always been thoughts, sensations have always been sensations. Without meditation, there really isn't much nuance in peoples mind. But the more you observe and understand your own mind, you will see how experience is made of a lot of component experiences subtle sensations, sensations, urges, subtle emotions, emotions, proto-thoughts, one-word thoughts, and full sentence thoughts... It will be obvious that experience always was this way, but you just didn't see it before.

There can be a crisis of confidence that "if I see my thoughts as thoughts they are unreal and will go away, leaving me without thoughts" That's not really true. There might be an adjustment period when you are thinking less and less compulsively, but it is more like you arrive at a new healthy balance for urges, emotions, and thoughts. Usually this is a lot less, a lot more calmer, a lot more "clear", than your life pre-mediation... but they don't really go away completely.

The last thing you will see is that "good/bad" is actually a full body experience. We might initially think "I need my thoughts to figure out good and bad", but really it's something that is part of every aspect of experience. It's actually very common to start navigating life more morally and responsibly by tuning into the "felt" sensation of the world. In other words, feelings and emotions can actually be more accurate than clunky word-thoughts for moment by moment navigation.

Notice that you mostly don't "verbally think" how to catheterize a vein. By now you probably look and "feel" like a nice straight surficial vein would make a good target. Your body knows that the "sensation" of having a relaxed but calm hand sensations means you are ready to start the needle moving. You "feel" for the pop, you "notice" the flash, you withdraw the needle along the path of least resistance, you feel the right pressure under your thumb which stops the blood as you tug off the tourniquet, you know in your gut if you have a patent IV, but you hook up the line and then see, and you watch your feelings as part of deciding are they getting a good flow...)

It's true that we all talk to ourselves while doing job stuff... but it's also true that the real skill shows up in a non-verbal way. It's just we don't notice it very often.

So basically, you are starting to "see" thoughts. You could say you are seeing the not-self aspect of thoughts and are starting to identify with awareness more than the content of awareness.

A big trap at this stage is thinking "oh I'm awareness. And when I'm awareness everything is nice and no problem... therefore contents of mind are the problem!" NO no no!  Contents of mind are just fine, no problem. The point is to learn to see everything as it is. See sensations as sensations, urges as urges, emotions as emotions, thoughts as thoughts, states as states. You don't need to do this verbally (e.g. labelling everything with words) but it can be good practice at first, like the 4 year old that learns to label their actions. A meditator learns to label their inner experience. But ultimately, you can just "notice" rather than note, like you did on your 30minute walk home. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7807440))

## Glimpses along the way.

It's almost ALWAYS the case that we get a "glimpse" of new stuff and then it takes days, weeks, months before another glimpse. That's just normal, it doesn't mean anything is wrong. Also, the mature version of what we glimpse is usually less extreme/profound over time... it becomes kind of normal. So be on the lookout for trying to make experiences into "very special things that show how very special I am".  Of course, it's totally okay to get excited about new developments in our practice, but just don't buy into the hype about different spiritual states. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7807440)) 

## Beginner's luck.

There seems to be a bit of beginner's luck a lot of the time... People can have quick experience when they start sitting, almost like a sneak preview, and then it takes a while to work back to that cutting edge. So don't be surprised if the next time you sit it doesn't go the same way. Pretty much the whole path of practice is sitting, glimpse of something, losing the something, sitting for a long time and getting frustrated, but then (usually when you give up on making progress) the something comes back and more, then it's lost, then you work up to it again, etc ... (You may be) primed for this kind of work in one sense, but also maybe a little fragile in another sense.  
  
... It is HIGHLY recommended that you develop your support team before getting into disruptive stuff. Finding a local practice group and teacher is best. Posting on here is okay, but it's kind of a crap shoot on who is around to reply. Some people set up practice logs here, on AwakeNetwork (my personal favorite place for people with committed daily practices), or Reddit Stream Entry, etc. Many of us have worked with meditation teachers/fellow practioners via skype/google hangouts and that has worked well, too.  
  
You have been given a nice sneak preview -- how very kind of the universe! emoticon But now take precautions and set up things so you can do this practice and make progress without really disrupting your life. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6727234)) 

## Three broad categories of meditators.

In Path of Purification (book) there is a description of the three broad categories of meditators. It's a generalization, but a useful tool. Usually we have one dominant pattern and then a secondary pattern that sometimes comes into play. Link: [The 3 Buddhist Personality Types: Which One Are You?](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elana-miller-md/personality-types_b_4125852.html)    
  
(In a) pretty classic aversive type, in the absense of distraction and in the openness of quiet, the meditator instinctually take an adversarial relationship to the situation. Lots of self judgement. I can remember a classic greedy type on one of my retreats: he started breathing deeply and with a sound that allowed him to focus (like victory breathing in yoga) and got so into it -- but really was unaware how selfish and distruptive he was. An ignorance type would zone out and not even be aware that they are on retreat. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5878174))

## Spiritually Ambitious People.

The people who really suffer are those that treat meditation/spirituality as something that makes them more and better. More wise, more intelligent, more perceptive, more accomplished, more grounded and better than everyone else without a practice. In essence, their practice is all about getting ahead and separating themselves from the rest of humanity.

The people who seem to make quick work of it are those who already know that life is up and down, fame and blame, wealth and loss, success and failure, but who seem to key into the sense of there being a basic, human sanity that is possible to develop and refine. A sanity that connects to the simplicity of being a perceptive human mind and a simple enjoyment of a human embodied experience. This is more a motivation of "I know I will be better for myself and all beings if I see through my compulsive ideas, behaviors, and endless competition with other people."

Practice "with a gaining idea" or being "spiritually ambitious" can really mess things up.

No one is totally pure of heart, so I'm not saying you need to get rid of your shadow desires before starting --- that's impossible. But I am saying that there should be some humility and groundedness from the beginning, otherwise all of the insights -- which basically destroy conventional defense mechanisms -- will feel like "losses" and instead of feeling intimacy with life, you'll feel isolated and lost.

All of this is paradoxical, so it isn't easy to describe... but although spiritual practice DOES make you feel isolated and lost, if there isn't ambition, it also allows you to better intimately connect. And even though you DO become more wise and perceptive, you also clearly see all of your incomplete development and stupidity. Hopefully it turns you into a good human, but if intentions are all wrong, it can turn you into a neurotic wreck.

In some sense, there really isn't a choice you need to make... life will kinda point to what you probably should do. But, to the extent that you can, think about intentions and consequences. Meditation kinda takes away the ways you can hide, so be clear about what you want to be. Meditation also wakes you up to the life you have, not some other life, so also make sure you are doing your best to make it a good one. Don't rely on mediation to fix all your life problems. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6184257)) 

## Dealing with a psyche that strives, that wants, that needs.

It's very very very hard to learn to deal with the part of our psyche that strives, that wants, that needs. It is such a core part of who we are. The only problem is we don't know how to turn it off or let it go. So we spend our entire life running towards the horizon, never catching it.  
  
Ambition is fine, but the point is to consciously use ambition skillfully, and not be used by by an primitive ambition-urge unconsciously and unskillfully.   
  
Normally, we think that 10% of what we need to know is right here and 90% of what we need to get is over the horizon. That's the way our brain tends to be wired, especially in modern life, where we read things and hear theories and believe those things more than our actual bodily experience in the world. It's only over time that we can actually appreciate that the experience that we want isn't over the horizon. It's actually more like we should be spending 90% of our mind just experiencing the reality of right now, and spend just 10% of our brain thinking about what we could do next in the future.  
  
When you look back on your meditation history, you will see that all of your "failures" pretty much had to happen. Our mind needs to be confronted by the consequence of having greed, aversion, and ignorance. Greed for better future, aversion for who we are now, ignoring the present moment. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5878174))

## What Buddhist practices are about.

Buddhist texts are basically written in a kind of code that sounds philosophical or religious -- and of course they work on that level -- but the real essence of it is how they practically get applied to our actually lived life in our actual body. So "dukkha" is basically "stress", "absence of greed, aversion, and indifference" is basically "tranquility", "meditation" means many things but it includes "cultivating equanimity", etc. Once you learn how to decode Buddhism, it becomes very practical.

I would say that Buddhist practices are about developing basic sanity and as an co-occurrence there are deeper/subtler insights into the nature of self... but many times people put the cart before the horse and think that Buddhism is about insights into the nature of self that "give you" basic sanity.

In practice, you become of where you are physically-emotionally-intellectually "knotted", you put awareness on that feeling of stress/ill-will/resistance (which can be difficult, it can be "difficult to find" or "scary to investigate"), but then when that experience can rest in awareness, without us wanting to change it or push it away, then the body-mind figures out how to understand the experience and let it go. This last stage tends to "happen" rather than being something that we make happen or "do".

"Vipassana" is "clear seeing" -- in meditation we clearly see our stresses, how they are created and held in the body-mind, and this leads to "Nibbana" which is the "extinguishing" of the stresses. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8317313))

## Nibbana is not a fixed state of happiness, it’s how the last moment translates into this moment and the next moment without any resistance.

The real trick of meditation, and what Buddha was pointing at, is not nibbana as a fixed state of happiness but rather it's the lack of doing battle with what already is while also being free to do worthwhile things. Appreciation and freedom. Nibbana is how the last moment translates into this moment and the next moment without any resistance. Time is always releasing the past and becoming the present --- but we rarely live our lives that way. Any fixed state goal always falls apart, but there are indeed people who are very effective at navigating the ups and downs of life. And it is true that some of the most resilient people are meditators.

We are basically handed this present moment and we can fight it or get depressed about it and all the subtle versions of negativity as well --- or we can meet the truth of the moment and live from there. Nibbana is how the current moment is always in flux, how it it always miraculously now, and therefore now is only "time" that we can ever make contact with our actual life.

We live a lot of our life living in hope and fear about the future and living in pride and shame about the past. In the current moment we get hung up on winning and losing and praise and criticism. But with basic sanity, we can that we do have some choice in whether we get hung up in hope and fear and pride and shame and winning and losing and praise and criticism. Sure, all those things will happen to us in our life, and all of those things can be good information at times, but there are a lot of options for how we create our sense of self. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11722800))

## May I awaken, but gently please.

Fast progress tends to be fairly energetic and disruptive. And I'm just making a joke that while in the beginning we want to make fast progress, after we've experience what fast progress does to the body and mind, most experience meditators say something like "I hope things are gentle" rather than "I hope I make fast progress".

Meditation pretty much always opens up psychological and physiological stuff, including physical effects that are variously described as kundalini, chakras, etc. While perhaps some people have textbook kundalini awakenings, the vast majority of meditators will go through various stages where it feels like the body is rewiring and all sorts of different sensations, spontaneous movements, energetic feeling will happen.

As always, don't try to fit your experiences into a model or expect that things will happen one way or another, just because some book or tradition says so. There is a lot of variation. And when there are a lot of openings, insights, new territory being uncovered, it is also more likely that the extreme stuff (that Daniel cautions about in his book) is possible.

So don't be in a rush, just treat each sit as just a sit. As Kenneth Folk says "consistency, not heroics" . If physical/energetic stuff shows up, don't resist, let it do its thing. And if it seems like too much, trust your conscience, slow down or stop practicing, walk around, see a movie, hang out with friends, chill for a bit. A big part of becoming a meditator is learning how to adjust the intensity of practice so the pot keeps simmering rather than boiling over. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5871714))

## Meditation is much closer to playing a guitar.

Meditation is a very esoteric practice: mind looking at mind to figure out what mind is. Self-investigating self to figure out what self is. It's pretty crazy when you think about it. It's much closer to playing an instrument. You can talk about it and describe how to play a guitar, but that will never allow you to play a guitar. It's all time spend training the body and guitar mechanics, developing the ear, developing a sense of rhythm/time, learning how to bend strings to the right pitch --- on and on and on. No one can say "just do this". You basically have to be like Slash or Hendrix and walk around all the time playing on and playing with your guitar...

Same thing with meditation. The only way to develop the machinery to see how mind creates a simulation of reality is to develop "mind looking at mind" ability. Learn how to distinguish sensations, urges, emotions, and thinking patterns. Learn how experience becomes modified by fears, resistances, past traumas, inhibitions, etc. Develop the ability to look at thoughts as thoughts. To notice how awareness requires no effort. Lots and lots of little things...  A teacher can usually help figure out what direction might be helpful, and usually practice itself points the way. Whatever is interesting or annoying about meditation usually has an insight somewhere in there...

So ultimately, it simply can't be said, which is why it doesn't get said. I could say "there is no mind" or "it is all mind" or "mind is self" or "the sense of self is just a sense of self" or "there is no self" or "suffering is personalizing pain" etc. if that would help, but it isn't quite the insight itself and I have a hunch that for 99% of people it would become just another unquestioned belief. The important thing is to peel away the illusions of mind and the illusions of self until, quite by accident you realize what others have realized. Then you really got it.

So this style of teaching is really just repeating practice instructions... if things seem solid and real, investigate them a bit more, you might find that they are both 100% vivid and real and 100% empty displays of mind. Until you can see how both are true, samsara is a trap. When you see both are true, you see how samsara is nirvana. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/4116801))

## Blend of sensory clarity & relaxing.

The path to SE is an interesting blend of sensory clarity AND relaxing. We tend to use the word "concentration" to mean an effortful directing of attention, but almost a better word for meditative concentration (jhana) is "centering". There is less and less effort the more and more centered you get. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11077371))

## Not a new stability, but rather an ability to navigate in a world of ambiguity.

After a certain point, meditation really does become about dropping defense mechanisms (in the psychological sense) and purification. A lot of our old ways of thinking/coping become blatantly obvious and seen as childish, and in its place is not a new stability, but rather an ability to navigate in a world of ambiguity. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6716082))

## Getting burnt out in meditation.

If you are getting burnt out in meditation, figure out why. Are you pushing too hard? Are you trying to skip steps? Are you focused on the fantasy of achievement and not on what is actually occurring? Are you intellectualizing the work instead of doing the work? Are you ignoring the fact that you don't understand what you are supposed to be doing? Are you failing to seek expert advice? Do you not allow enough time for the work? Are you doing what you "should" do instead of what you deeply "want" to do? Are you going through the motions but not really committing? Are you failing to celebrate your accomplishments? Are you beating yourself up for your failures? Are you managing time to allow for success? Are you investing in the tools, books, workshops that would inform your efforts? Are you getting enough food, exercise, and rest to support your efforts? Do you have friend/associates that you can talk with and share ideas? Are you getting incremental results that inspire you?

Notice how all of these questions/problems are relevant to meditation practice and for every other pursuit in the world. And notice that the real wisdom comes from having problems and finding solutions along the way. And then those solutions are really tailored to you, they are exactly what you needed to learn.

The key thing here is the feeling of being burnt out IS the teacher. Don't try to avoid it (because then you won't be working as hard as you could) or make it go away (because then you just set yourself for bigger problems), but rather be sensitive to it and spend time figuring out the root cause when it arises. Over the course of getting good at something, you have many many many lessons about burn out as you become better and better at what you do. Experts have just as many problems as beginners, it's just that they have better problems.

People often overlook the one in the middle of that paragraph: Are you doing what you "should" do instead of what you deeply want to do? Life is short and there is only so much that can be done. So spend your time well. It's perfectly fine to experiment with lots of things and try them out, but at a certain point it should become clear that nothing worth doing is going to be easy. But if you seeing results and you want the results, then there is motivation.

And then the rest is simply arranging your life so that you can do that thing. You can never fit an additional new into your life, you have to give up stuff to fit it in. Unfortunately, people keep adding and adding stuff until they can't do anything well.

One last koan from a high-level athletic trainer: you don't even have to like the workouts if you LOVE the results. I certainly felt this way about meditation practice for years. Didn't like the experience of sitting, loved what it was doing for my basic sanity. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/12403009))

## Learning to balance effort and relaxation is what provides the mental sanity and healing that we ultimately want out of practice.

Most people do not try hard enough in meditation, which is why most books/teachers emphasize effort. But the few people that are actually putting in the hours and retreat time tend to be the ones that try too hard. As a result, they kind of shoot past equanimity … too much effort kept me looping (A&P <–> DN ñanas) and didn't allow me to settle into EQ … The good news is that a much more gentle approach will not only lessen the "heat", but it will also lead to a stable EQ and eventually SE. And much more importantly, the VERY VERY good news is learning how to do that is what provides the mental sanity and healing that we ultimately want out of practice. SE really doesn't change the person that much. It is all the work leading up to SE, learning to balance effort and relaxation, that’s what really changes a person. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11077371))

## Sailing across the ocean image.

It is important to go slower and with patience and be much more accepting of how the mind naturally balances itself. You will find you have much more stable access to jhana and the dark night ñanas become interesting rather than disturbing/"hot". It will still require effort/dedication, but a different kind of effort. It's much more like sailing across an ocean. You need to learn to follow the wind and adjust the sails ... and you will get there. If you start paddling really hard because you want to make quicker progress, you just burn too much energy, become exhausted, and eat up all your food before you get across. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11077371))

## Mountain climbing image.

I have found that maybe out of the 10 times I'm contacted by someone, only 1 seems to want to really dive into the challenges of their practice. The other 9 are looking for some way to avoid having challenges or who underestimate the work it takes to practice daily and go on a few retreats a year. Meditation is a very serious activity, almost like mountain climbing, where people need to be very dedicated and focused on working on weakness and turning those weaknesses into strengths. It's also like mountain climbing in the sense that it is a personal accomplishment, but no one else really cares, so after you climb the mountain you are not a hero in everyone's eyes or if someone does idolize you for a while it doesn't last long. So it's important to be really personally curious rather than driven by ideas of power, riches, or fame. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11077371))

## Wasted Time.

It really feels like 95% of meditation is wasted time, but in retrospect we'll see how the "wasted time" was actually when we were learning about how our mind really was. It's sort of like if someone was learning to dance, the first year or two might mostly be "feeling clumsy" and not dancing, but learning how to dance is all about learning to feel the body as it is so that the intelligence of the body figures out how to move more gracefully. If you are actually brave enough to feel the clumsiness of being clumsy, then you are actually learning to dance. In the same way, time spent noticing all the ways the mind gets seduced by greediness for progress, aversion to reality, and fantasies about ideal performance is a great meditation practice and not wasted time at all. People have a tendency to berate themselves for not doing it right when hindrances appear, but that's completely wrong. If you are aware of the hindrances then that's good meditation. If you are actually curious about and investigate hindrances, then that's GREAT meditation. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/15763667)) 

## Sitting should be fairly pain free.

Muscle aches are fine, but pain isn't good. An achy body should recover between sits ... Switch positions often enough that there is no pain. Support your lower back against a wall, like monks sitting at the base of a tree. If sitting causes pain, then stand. If standing causes pain, then lie down. If you can't meditate while on your back (too prone to sleeping) then do walking meditation. Don't trash your body before a retreat.  
  
Investigate what is making you continue to sit through pain. Are you trying to get "strong"? Are you afraid of being weak? Do you have doubts about the practice or the method? Sometimes we force ourself to do stuff when we're trying cover up something we don't want to face. Adjust, adjust, adjust. Be skillful. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5878174))  

## A successful sitting can be short or long, but it should put you face to face with all of your imperfections.

A successful practice can be short or long, but it should put you face to face with all of your imperfections. You should be seeing how your own greed, aversion, and confusion prevents you from simply sitting and being a breathing body for the length of your sit. All of us have those cravings that prevent us from doing this simple thing. It's amazing when you think about it, but that's what makes practice so interesting.  
  
Why is it so complicated to simply sit? That's what you need to see.  
  
If practice is showing you all the different ways you have ill will for simply sitting, that's good practice. Investigate that sense of ill will. Can you see how your own attitudes make things complicated and cause suffering?  
  
If metta practice is showing ways that you resist having good intentions for your self and others, that's good practice. Investigate that sense of ill will. Can you see how not having good intentions complicates your relationship to yourself and others?  
  
Time on the cushion >plus intelligent investigation of the causes of suffering< is very good practice.   
  
Practice doesn't just "give" you results or allow your to avoid the mess. You need to participate in practice and discover your own path through the mess.   
  
... Sometimes less is more (regarding the lenght of the practice). The point is to sit and be aware of your actual experience -- sensations, cravings, emotions, and thoughts. You can use the breath or noting to help keep you present, but it should be a presence that allows all of those four things to arise and be seen ...  a military platoon can march for hours, never losing track of their footsteps and never stopping breathing/counting one-two-three-four... but that is unlikely to lead to awakening. They're putting in hours, they are attentive, they are successful in their practices... but it doesn't work that way. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5878174))

## Hindrances are actually the teacher.

Focusing on the breath is fine, but it’s almost more important to stay interested in the hindrances themselves that are showing up. Those hindrances are actually the teacher. You don't need to silence hindrances by drowning it out with a focus on breath. In fact, a really good approach is to hold both the hindrances and the breath in the same awareness and get interested in both. People who do multi-week retreats don't have perfect minds with no hindrances, but rather they create a big enough space for the hindrances so that they arise and pass in awareness, like a tiny kid on a giant stage in a huge auditorium. And they don't need to ignore the kid either, but rather put a spotlight on the kid and really appreciate the kid's performance, so to speak. I struggled with this stuff for a few decades before I realizing that getting interested in how the mind gets seduced by hindrances is actually the easy and interesting and wisdom-creating and fastest path forward. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/15763667))

## “Know yourself and you heal yourself. Heal yourself and everyone else is healed”.

This is the little prayer/metta meditation I do … Self forgiveness is really the heart of this thing. Meditation gets described as some kind of "I'll get smarter and see reality" thing, but that's just the bait and hook. In fact, what meditation really becomes is "I knew I was fucking myself up, but I never understood how until I sat with myself for a while... and now I realize that I used to fuck myself up the same way that everyone else is fucking themselves up." That's where compassion really starts to become real and the idea of forgiving others becomes possible. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/15763667))

Anger. Anger is usually a protective mechanism that is often overblown, but at the core there is usual a very true sense of injustice or wounding. Perhaps your co-worker not respecting your time or your skills. Go to what is motivating the anger. The trick is not to stay with the sense of being outraged, but to explore the next layer. It's important recognize that you wouldn't be angry if you didn't honestly perceive yourself as unrespectable or unskilled too.

It's important to recognize that anger never shows up if we don't believe the accusation/implications at all. The co-worker would just be seen as crazy. The anger floods in if we are vulnerable about something and feel like we need to protect our self. Keep looking for this thing about the situation that is both unjust yet also somewhat true. This is digging out the subtle "ignorance" of the situation.

Once you find it, now you have a much more complex and strange knot to deal with. On one hand, someone is being unfair. On the other hand, they are pointing out something that you really don't want to see. On one hand, they are at fault. On another hand, there is an element of truth. And you have the you, right now, observing all of these dimensions.

Now sit with both extremes of anger being right and wrong, unjustified and justified, and you being a participant and an observer, you as being trapped by the situation and you being independent of past history --- all the polarities of the situation.

If you hold this complex tangle of emotions/sensations/ideas it will slowly untangle. Usually with an "ah ha!" kind of realization about other times this circuit of anger was triggered. There is no way to hold someone's hand and lead them through this, but by digging around, reliving it, and investigating it, usually there is a critical thing that hasn't been seen before, something that would actually prevent a similar thing (hours of post-event anger) from happening again. Maybe something you can do at work to document things better or communicate things better, maybe something you need to work on psychologically ---- it really can be amazing to see the burst of creative thinking/seeing that happens after the "knot" of the event is digested.

And then you need to flip the whole situation and see that this idiot at work actually helped point you towards something important, so in a way was very helpful, so you thank that person, too.   And then kinda marvel at how the world works, how strange and interesting and painful and exciting and enjoyable. It really is an amazing adventure. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6989255))  

## Emotional Reactivity.

 The short story is we believe our emotional reactivity will "protect us", because at an earlier stage of development it sorta did.  But only through a lot of investigation as an intelligent and very attentive adult will that protective urge be seen as the cause of suffering rather than the protection from suffering. Constantly protecting an imagined future self is exhausting. But we can't just intellectually decide to stop it. We need to feel the suffering caused by it... and then we (eventually) drop it like a hot coal.   
  
... The difference between unskillful and suppresion is basically the degree of awareness and the ability to change. For example, anger can be a healthy emotion, but it can also be the most destructive emotion. So when someone shoves you on the streets of Chicago, good anger can clear your mind and put our body into ready mode ---- but the important thing comes next: is your mind truly clear? are you already bought into a lot of assumptions about truly being in danger, needing to attack, etc.? Are you equally able to respond with a duck if a punch is coming and respond with a laugh if it turns out it's your friend playing around? All our human wiring is useful --- to the extent we don't believe it 100% and stay open to new information.  
  
Probably the only way to not feel tense is to allow yourself to have the emotion but make a study out of it: is it really helpful? Does it make life better? Is it true? Is it reliable? Eventually you'll discover what everyone has discovered: that most blind/reactive emotions are simplistic ways the body/mind tries to protect itself, but the degree to which they aren't 100% fully experienced means we have, to some degree, gone unconscious and are in an non-thinking trance. That unthinkingness is what gets us.  
  
For example, my wife was on a packed subway and some guy kept moving his foot against her foot. (The subway was packed and she wasn't facing him.) She would move a little, and the man's food would creep toward hers again, until she was feeling the press of the side of his foot against the side of hers.... eventually the car clears of enough people that she is able to turn around... and the guy has leg braces and is having trouble standing. there is no place for the poor guy to sit. So of course my wife was happy to let him help brace himself against his foot.  But can you see how all sorts of assumed ideas about the situtation could lead to all kinds of suffering until she is able to turn around. So emotions are great for pointing you toward the appropriate information to investigate, but they aren't dependable as a complete source of truth.  
  
  
Anyway the point is that it is entirely possible to have fear, anger, lust, misery, etc. arise and not have the mind get locked into trance. Over time, you can, for example learn to have all the clarity of anger without the lashing out or seething hatred of anger. This is basically the idea of tantra. That a full experience of greed/territorialism leads to generosity, a full experience of aggression leads to clarity, a full experience of obsession leads to compassion. that a full experience of paranoia leads to appropriate action, and a full experience of confusion/depression leads to intelligence. --- this is basic 5 element practice. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8496517))  

## It is definitely possible to climb out of patterned behavior.

It's important to realize that most people live their lives as if their emotions are true. They lash out when they are angry, they indulge what makes them feel good. They are basically trapped in their emotions. But emotions are just emotions, they don't necessarily need to translate into action. There can be a lot of freedom around emotions if you can learn to just let them be as they are, but not necessarily react to them all the time. I have hunch that your practice with emotions is allowing you to see this.  
  
And this probably led to the next observation that "beliefs are just beliefs". This is a major realization. Even more people are trapped in their beliefs, but beliefs are just beliefs and they don't necessarily need to translate into action. There can be a lot of freedom around beliefs as well... but unfortunately, the first true realization that beliefs are beliefs can feel like a scary void.  
  
We all have ways of reacting to void/absence/lacking... basically lots of different overreactions: freaking out, shutting down, distracting ourselves with drama, having sex, self-medicating, reckless behavior, guilt/shaming ourselves... All of us have our own flavor of dealing with fear of the void. It's strongly conditioned by how we dealt with it in the past. It usually is a combination of how our parents related to us and how we instinctually dealt with the absence of the parent; plus how we dealt with presence/absence as children, teenagers, etc.  It can be be amazing to see all the ways we live in patterns...   
  
The trauma cycle is a pattern too, of course. I have a hunch you were starting to see how traumatized people tend to shut down and how that weakness makes them even more vulnerable to abusers. Abusers tend to hunt for previously abused people to abuse, and they find them by noticing when people shut down. Tragically, abusers are usually abused people themselves, trying to gain power over their trauma by being an abuser, which just continues the pattern. It's fucked up. It's a horrible set of recurring patterns.  
  
But it is definitely possible to climb out of patterned behavior. The biggest challenge is learning how to be with the kinds of feelings that caused us to shut down or overreact. That's the goal of psychology and mediation: being able to experience things without falling into patterned behavior.   
  
The bigger the feelings, the more beneficial it is to work with therapists and meditation teachers. Therapy really is the most direct method for dealing with difficult feelings. Some people use meditation but it just takes too long, why waste time? So much better to grow past the major traumas. Mediation is probably better at subtle stuff, but it makes a great combination with therapy. Folks that do both seem to make the quickest and deepest progress. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7244650))

## Purification and insight arise together.

The key to the entire universe of meditation and psychology and yoga: when you put your awareness on something you would otherwise normally avoid, the mind's intelligence figures out how to release or "purify" the discomfort. And the body/mind will non-verbally know or have an "insight" into how to release the discomfort. Purification and insight arise together.

A longer explanation, skip to the bottom for the short answer:

If you are doing yoga and stretching the body and encounter tightness, then you simply hold the position and put your awareness on the tightness. In time, the body will realize that it is not in danger and will \_slightly\_ relax. So the tightness has been "purified" and the body will "know" that it can move into that extended position. There is a limit of course on what you can do in a day and consistent practice is necessary to make further progress.

If you are in psychotherapy and encounter a resistance or defensive reaction, then you simply put your attention on the thoughts and feelings of it. Other associated thoughts and feelings will show up and you welcome those too. You continue to hold the sense of resisting or defensiveness in attention and eventually it becomes clear that this habit is based on something in the past, something that you now see clearly, and you are safe and can let go of that resistance, you don't need to defend yourself. So the defensive mechanism is "purified" and the mind has an "insight" into the nature of mind. Of course, there is only so much progress you can make in a day, but it can be amazing how lifelong problems can be seen through in a short time, but only if you continue therapy until you reach that goal.

If you are in meditation, using whatever meditation method, and encounter any form of dukkha and hold it in awareness, then all of the above things will happen of course --- you will release body knots and psychological complexes --- but it has the potential to also include much more subtle releases related to fundamental clinging/identity. Regardless, the mechanism is the same whether by body scanning or noting or other methods: if you put your mind on ill-will/dukkha the natural intelligence of the mind will see the discomfort involved with clinging, aversion, or indifference and the mind itself will "release" the ill-will/dukkha. In meditation, progress can happen very quickly and very deeply, because it is working with the very primal aspects of clinging, aversion, or indifference which is the base of all our problems. All meditations "purify" the mind of these three poisons and give us "insights" into the nature of mind.

So many different meditation traditions and many different therapeutic methods all have the same basic core: if you put your awareness on something, the natural intelligence of the mind will try to find the least-stressful way of relating to it, whether it is in body, psychology, or deep mind.

So long story short: you will get the same purifications and insights using either Mahasi technique or Goenka technique. You are completely free to use one or the other or both. Meditation techniques are all tools for helping us put our attention on things we would rather avoid and to keep us directly experiencing the ill-will/dukkha until the mind instinctually figures out how to release dukkha. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11232739)) 

## 3 days, 3 weeks, 3 months, 3 years.

One paradigm that I've found really helpful is 3 days, 3 weeks, 3 months, 3 years. These are all the crisis points for starting something new. After 3 days, the glamor wears off and meditation is just meditation. After 3 weeks, the time commitment becomes obvious and you start fantasizing about all the awesome things you could be doing. After 3 months, the sits begin really truly working -- which means you start going through developmental/psychological changes -- which is somewhat uncomfortable and it seems easier to quit. After 3 years, you know the benefits and you have also made A LOT! of improvements, but part of you doubts whether continuting is worth it and you think, maybe I can scale back, but this often leads to quitting and not getting all the benefits.  
  
The number one way to be successful is to block out time in advance and PROTECT that time. It is for your meditation practice, period. It is for your practice but it will benefit everyone you meet, so it is important for everyone that you have this time. Don't let yourself or others down by skiping your sit. Start with short sits, but don't skip a day. Ironically, the more consistent your are, the easier it is to be consistent. Consistency makes consistency easier, simple as that.   
  
... If you can avoid the whole "angsty meditator" syndrome that often happens after initial "excited meditator" phase, then you will be ahead of the game. Many people get caught in a whole meditator identity-and-shadow-side thing. They start meditating, have initial success, it gets somewhat difficult, they deny the problems they are having, and then their sits become about intellectualizing experience.   
  
The way to avoid that is so simple, but it takes maturity. Basically, keep doing a daily practice. When things are great, then great! When things suck, then great! Keep practice going, gently and consistenly, and it will work out. Sitting is about making progress, then reaching a plateau, getting stuck for a while, and then suddenly going -- oh, now I "see" that thing that was causing problems. I was ignoring it or resisting it, but now if I can just experience it without doing anything, it isn't a problem. There is no reason to be angsty. We need to experience problems so we actually find solutions. It's just how this works. But the good news is being a part of the progress is fascinating. Wow, the mind is amazing! So each time a problem happens, cool! This is a chance to work on the next thing. And the next thing is seen and the mind is just a little clearer and saner.  
([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6003541))

## Time off.

Time off is good. But it is really clear that without practicing, we kind of slide backwards. Like paddling up a river, you find some rate of paddling at some sustainable pace and make slow progress, sometimes hitting slow current and making faster progress, sometimes fast current and slow progress, but if you stop you kind of go shooting backwards. Consistent daily practice is the secret. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7020900)) 

## Start with a home retreat. Don't skip steps. Life really happens when you meet it half way.

A 1 day retreat, then a 3 day retreat, then a 5 day retreat, then a 10 day retreat, then a 14 day retreat.   
  
Don't worry about big plans now except figuring out how you can do a 1 day retreat. Simple. Life can't be lived all at once. And "our life" really happens when you meet it half way. We are responsible for taking the next step... and then life kinda happens in a way that shocks and surprises us.   
  
It's important to spend some time truly visualizing what we want. When we visualize, pay attention to the body. A true vision is nourishing, with a little bit of a fearful edge. A fake vision is pure pleasure, like too much sugar. Or a fake vision is all ambition/aggression, like too much coffee and adrenaline. A true vision has heart.  
  
And once you have the vision, figure out "what is the next smallest step I can take?" Focus on that. Don't skip steps. Make it really really simple. Like let's say you want to do a one day home retreat. The first thing you'll need is a place to sit. Tidy up your sitting space --- done! Nothing fancy, but you are now a step closer.   
  
The tricky thing about vision is that we get too attached to our plans to get there. The purpose of the vision is to help clarify the next step. We can only do the next step in life. This moment, the next step. And if our steps wind up giving us more information about reality (like "a 13 day retreat kicked my ass") then we adjust our next step, rather than clinging to our original plan. "Okay, that was too much, too soon. Gotta build up to that."  
  
Vision, next step, adjust. We need to take the middle path between lazy and ambitious.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/16187774))

## A general rule for retreats.

A general rule for retreats is similar for a general rule for working out: go slow, develop a good foundation, and slowly increase the training intensity. So for a generic person, this would be a reasonable progression:

1. Practice 30 minute sits at home

2. Practice 1 hour sits at home

3. Practice 1 hour sits every day for six months to a year at home

4. Continue practicing 1 hour sits every day at home and sometimes do a sit, walk, sit for a 2-3 hours home retreat on weekends

5. Do a one day retreat (10 to 16 hours of alternating sitting and walking, with one guided meditation in the beginning of the day and listening to a dharma talk at the end of the day).

6. Continue practicing 1 hour sits every day at home and sometimes do a one day home retreat

7. Do a weekend or 5 day retreat.

8. Practice 1 to 2 hours every day at home and sometimes do weekend retreats

9. Do a 7 to 10 day retreat

10. Practice 1 to 2 hours every day and do another 10 - 14 day retreat

11. Consider a month long retreat.

12. Practice 1 to 2 hours every day and consider a three month retreat.

This advice is for retreats where there isn't much one-on-one guidance. If a retreat encourages complete beginners (and says that specifically) and includes several guided meditations a day and daily teacher one-on-one guidance and the ability to leave the meditation hall and go for a walk instead of meditating so much... then maybe someone could do those retreats earlier in their practice. In general, someone could skip one step or so, but I would never jump ahead too much. It would be sort of like trying to bench press too much weight too early in training. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/13153412))

## Pacing is everything on a long retreat.

Pacing is everything on a long retreat and you have to find out what actually works for you. Think about intensity of practice, schedule of practice, and methods of practice before you go. This is my personal advice, but only you know if it works for you.

For some people "practice your butt off" is the way to go. For me, I just burn out every single time I take that approach. You might feel compelled to do that approach, but I can't in good conscience recommend it.

I actually recommend the "for every single moment of retreat, I will go into the experience of actually being on retreat. I will become intimate with everything I sense, feel all the primal urges, experience all the tones of emotions, and notice what I think as thoughts." I also throw away all goals and say "may whatever happens on retreat be for the benefit of all beings, including myself. May all beings benefit from me being on retreat. May I experience on retreat whatever will bring the highest benefit for myself and all beings." Goals are great, but why not have the highest goal?

So without bring an external agenda besides my mode of practice, I go deep into the feeling of being an actual human on retreat. I find that this keeps me grounded and whole. Retreat becomes delicious. Hard at times for sure, but always rich. Rich with pleasure, rich with wonder, rich with times of endurance, rich with times of rest. That richness of experience is the main thing to keep constant. The actually tone of the richness will change throughout the retreat. Don't script yourself into thinking it always needs to be torture to make progress. Absolutely not true. It can and should be a delight to rest in the pleasure of seclusion, as the suttas say.

The other side of it is I keep to the practice schedule, unless there is a very good reason not to. So if it's sitting time, I'm sitting. If it's walking time, I'm walking. This becomes very hard after a while. There can be a desire to mix it up, to make it more interesting. But I find that these urges are avoidance mechanisms. Look into the ill will that wants to mix things up. Chances are you'll find greed, aversion, and ignorance. Now of course fine tune the schedule to work for you. I know I wake up early and benefit from a post lunch nap, so that's what I do. I know I don't stay up as late as other people and want to go to sleep early, so that's what I do. Within that, I find alternating hours of sitting and walking to be just about right.

For walking, you want to focus on relaxing the body, relaxing the aches, freely swinging the joints to help keep your body recovering from all the sitting practice. You will feel sore and tired, but gently walk, gently flush the muscles. It's totally normal to go through a period of deep aches and pains. Make sure you vary the pace and walk both quickly and slowly at times, feeling what seems right. You don't need to walk slowly, this is a weird hang up people have. The mind is very very very fast. You can stay mindful as you walk somewhat briskly. If you are feeling dull, try walking a little quicker. If you are feeling manic, SLOW DOWN. The main thing is to walk at the pace where you stay mindful of what you are doing and walk at a pace where you can feel yourself relax.

Remember mindful eating, mindful peeing, mindful shitting, and mindful showering, mindful putting on clothes, mindful taking off clothes, mindful brushing of teeth, mindful combing of hair. Never come off retreat. Always be richly in your actual experience. Big experiences happen at the strangest time (flipping the lid on a shampoo bottle) so always stay richly in your actual experience. Every experience is important. I kinda want to put that in caps: EVERY EXPERIENCE IS IMPORTANT. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6811263)) 

## Inquiries on the Observer.

Inquiry isn't about verbal answers, it's about gently and intimately going deep into the subtly of experience. If it makes you manic and desparate... that's not on the path. If it makes you curious about the mystery, that's on the path.  
  
Are you the observer? What knows the observer? ... The reason I mentioned this inquiry question is that's the direction this process tends to go. We start off by assuming that "I am what I feel and what I think" and then gets to the point "I am the observer that is aware of feelings and thoughts"... but the next stage --- and really the domain of meditation, not many other practice keep going --- is noticing how even aspects of "being the observer" can be observed... and this is what leads to a deep understanding of the non-dual nature of experience, so to speak.  
  
Meditation is mostly: (1) discovering how needless dukka arises through unskillful reactivity, and (2) seeing through the experiential felt-sense of being an observer. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8496517)) 

## Balancing the spiritual and the conventional.

As you look through DhO and AN, you'll probably be surprised at the lack of conflict between having a consistent personal practice and "the conventional world". Many people have progressed far along the path with limited and even no retreat sessions, simply doing 30 minutes to an hour once or twice a day. In the early days of DhO, there was a smallish community of people posting their daily practice and people providing feedback. Pretty much everyone that had a consistent practice went pretty far, regardless of their daily family (single, married, married with kids) or working life (unemployed, easy work, lots of drama work). So it really isn't about balancing the spiritual and conventional, the real challenge is simply finding a way to organize your life so that you have a consistent sitting practice. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5830612)) 

## The body/mind changes slowly.

That's just how it works. Many times when things are progressing slowing in mediation, we're basically recovering from some trauma (physical, social, drug-induced chemical) or we're developing psychologically (e.g., going from young adult to adult, etc.) and so there is a very good reason why things are going slow. It very very very very very very rarely makes sense to try and make or force progress happen. Usually that just results in more psychological instability. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6454890))

## Dedication time required to be ‘significantly done’.

It really isn't too difficult to pursue it while being part of the working world. I would say that daily meditation, two or three 10-14 day retreats a year (two vacations), plus 3 to 6 four day retreats a year (long weekends) for 7 years is much more than enough to get it "significantly done" … My experience is that the hardest part about making the work-dharma thing happen is using your calendar to make it happen. Intention or will power isn't enough. You need to schedule your vacation-retreats, schedule your long weekends, block out the time on your daily calendar for sits, and prioritize exercise and sleep (over things like internet/entertainment) so that you stay healthy and recover. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/12228851))

## Better than looking for short-cuts, have basic sanity as a goal.

It's important to think about what the short cut is leading to, much much more than trying to find the short cut method. If you have a clear goal, all of this stuff about meditation will make much more sense and our practice path will be much more obvious. I'm going to suggest that the goal is basic sanity. Not being entrapped by limited development, reactive patterns, bad habits, repressive thinking, fantasy, infatuations and regressions. It means stepping out of the role of a child that is dependent on the parent, and becoming an independent adult. Awakening, both the first little steps and the last little steps, should always lead to greater sanity, well-being, compassion, resilience, independence, and self-sufficiency.

Methods and practices that say "hey, give up your critical thinking for a while, listen only to the teacher, report your findings using only our terminology and ignore things that don't fit the model" always seem to offer short term benefits, but in the long term, they trap you in dependence. It's always fine to experiment with different methods -- but always keep your independence and personal power.

And be sure to experiment with different psychological methods and theories. In many ways these are 75% of what it takes to awaken. It is very difficult to have a decent sitting practice if every time you sit you are retraumatized by old memories or are covering up the present moment with lots of fantasies and intellectualizing. That said, many "meditation methods" are basically psychological practices it's important to see that, too.

There are many things that can be "hacked" in spirituality -- you can give yourself interesting experiences through sleep or food deprivation, you can have odd cathartic moments by overstimulation and retraumatization, you can intellectualize developmental insights so that you can parrot the words without really being at that developmental level, you can be marketed or hypnotized or brainwashed into thinking and doing many things. The power of imagination and self-deception is amazing, too. It really is endless. It's a minefield.

But the nice thing is you really can't lie to yourself. If you let yourself relax and be at ease, you'll know if practice is really helping or not. Go to your body. Are you actually more relaxed and at peace? Or are you buzzy and frantic with lots of thoughts and ideas and ambition? How do you really feel about your Self and the present moment. Is it simply so? Or is it a heroic adventure to greater and greater accomplishments and --- aha!, if this is the way your mind is going then your present self and the present moment is just a means to an future end and you really aren't able to be at home in the present moment. If you are always future oriented, you're not crazy but there is probably an aspect of basic sanity that is being overlooked.

In terms of what it means to have these insights in a modern world, this paper does a great job of talking about adult development. You will notice that it sets a very high bar for adult development. Many of us never get close to the end stages and all of us over estimate where we are at! Check: Cook & Greuter “Nine Levels Of Increasing Embrace In Ego Development: A Full-Spectrum Theory Of Vertical Growth And Meaning Making”  [Link to PDF](http://www.cook-greuter.com/Cook-Greuter%209%20levels%20paper%20new%201.1'14%2097p%5B1%5D.pdf)   ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/10190061)) 

## Only basic sanity creates the conditions for happiness.

Basic sanity allows us to go through the ups and downs of life without becoming decadent or freaking out. If we have a lot of psychological patterns that aren't healthy, then it's nearly impossible to have happiness. So go for sanity if you want happiness. And meditation may or may not be a part of that pursuit. It doesn't have to be. Really the best combo is some kind of psychological therapy along with some kind of meditation. That's a powerful combo. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/19830856))

## A whole body/mind/heart approach: three domains of development that occur in parallel during meditation.

There are three domains of development that occur in parallel during meditation practice: (1) cleaning up "psychological pathologies"; (2) conventional "adult development"; (3) and insights into emptiness/mind nature. These are so intimate with each other that they interact with the other, but making the distinction leads to greater clarity and a better ability to fine-tune practice/teaching.

What is interesting is different methods under the big category of "meditation" have different emphasis which relate to these three domains...

Psychological Pathologies: "Monkey Mind" is basically the mind distancing itself from an intimate experience of the current moment and this is the early phase of practice. We have to initially lose our enchantment with our own mental chattering. (Doesn't have to go away, just lose interest in it). Then there are more subtle repressions/defense mechanisms/layering over traumas. This clearly comes up in meditation practice and it's clear to me that this has been the intention of Buddhism's pointing toward "outflowings" --- the automatic reactive patterns that are running on autopilot and get triggered whenever we encounter a condition that we can't experience with compassion (i.e. fully experience with sensitivity and equanimity). Basically, it initially seems like our sense of personality is going away because we identify with these habitual psychological patterns, but loosening up the knots results in a better expression of our true personality and unhindered intelligence. This is more of a relating to things as they are, so an "intelligence" domain. So that's all psychological.

Ego Development: Then there are the stages of ego development, which can be hindered by lots of psychological pathologies, but is a different "context" for holding the sense of identity.  I always point to the Cook-Grueter 9 States of ego development as the best resource I've found. As one loses a backlog of pathologies, an adult is likely to move along the ego development stages, but this is much more highly influenced by a person's culture. It is very difficult to grow beyond certain stages of identity without having models or being around people who are at these highest stages of development... because each stage of growth loses a kind of easy certainty about who we are and what is meaningful in life. I don't know what to quite call this, but I would say that this is more of a "wisdom" spectrum, but each stage has it's own wisdom and frankly a good hearted person at a lower stages is better for the world than a pathological higher level person. I think it is probably possible to be psychological "clean" but at different stages of ego development, likewise it's possible to be have advanced ego development but lingering psychological pathologies that overwhem the person -- so you can get evil geniuses, so to speak. In general, however, the further the ego development, the less suffering there is from one's own internal material, but unfortunately one's ego identity can clash with the dominant cultural ego identities... which creates a different kind of suffering, a feeling of being on the fringe, so to speak.

Meditation: Then the third aspect is the domain of meditation, and like it or not, it's all about the emptiness of mind nature. Like I said, the other aspects dominate what happens in meditation, but meditation investigates mind nature in a way that goes beyond these domains. One way I would say it is that there is a kind of "optimizing" that occurs in the previous two domains. Meditation seems to go beyond finding states in which "one feels whole and complete". Meditation recognizes that too as a "state" of being, which has characteristics and an experiential "tone". And people who go really deep into meditation are curious about that and "what recognizes/experiences this state?" This leads into very subtle investigations, really below the domain of words/ego identity and prior to fully development psychological pathologies, and teases apart a very subtle knot of suffering/identity. The same language of psychology and ego development can be used to explain this, but really there aren't words for this and there certainly isn't external authority for this. It's a very personal investigation and oddly enough, everyone's awakening looks slightly different, even though there is a kind of universality that makes it possible for it to be recognized.

The interesting thing about awakening is while the person has to be fairly psychologically clean and ego developed, they don't need to be fully so. So this is why you get all the fucked-up guru/teachers. I think it's a losing battle to argue, "oh you don't know mind nature" because they might, but it is not the point. So it's much more direct to say: hey fucked-up guru/teacher you are psychological regressed and at a low stage of ego development and so you think criminal actions are okay. We're going to treat you like any other criminal, into the courtroom and the prision you go. You see what I mean? This would be a case where the meditation domain is much more advanced than the psychological and ego development and being clear about this makes things much easier to understand.

So, pursuing meditation to the exclusion or as a work-around for the other psychological and ego development is pretty much a failure. If you want psychological clarity, be clear on that and focus on it. (Meditation methods can be used, but focus on psychology aspect of it). If you want ego development, be clear on that (yes, meditation methods can be used for this, but focus on the ego development aspect of it.) If you want awakening, make sure you are getting your psychological and ego development together, because what you will wake up to is the psychological and ego development that still needs to be done!

Anyway, I hope this helps people think about their practice and why there is a lot of value in really taking a whole body/mind/heart approach to practice rather than struggling to complete something according to someone else model/map. Only you know what is giving you trouble in your life. Honor practices that work on the things you need to work on. Don't blindly follow a method or map. Become your own expert of your own condition and follow a path that makes sense to you. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7159413))

Just to make sure I made my point clear: this is a 3 overlapping domains model, not any statement about sequential stages (which is what I think of when something is characterized as a 3 stage model).

Basically, the "turning toward" ill-will/suffering/resistance/discomfort causes progress in all three domains (faster developmental feedback loop), yet each domain can be distinguished if you want to optimize for one. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7159413))

## Deal directly with depression and isolation rather than hope that mediation will fix it.

Meditation is kind of a weird pursuit with a lot of technical aspects to it... and it is only sort of related to getting out of depression and social isolation. Although there is a lot of hype about meditation -- and I'm a big fan obviously -- sometimes people talk about it like it cures everything you want it to, but that's not quite right. That's sort of like all those people saying that yoga or nutrition or a positive mental attitude or religion or politics or exercise or (insert anything here) is a magic cure that will fix all of our problems. Sure, good stuff is good stuff, but one thing doesn't fix everything.

That's why some meditation websites have information on basic health and mental well being, like this: [health and balance](https://www.reddit.com/r/streamentry/wiki/health-and-balance) , That said, there are books like [10% Happier](https://www.10percenthappier.com/)  and others that talk about how meditation can help. Maybe other folks will have suggestions, too.

My own view is it's much better to deal directly with depression and isolation rather than hope that mediation will fix it. Meditation is great for looking at the mind and see all the ways we make things worse for ourselves. Sometimes it isn't obvious that we worry too much or second-guess ourselves too much. It can be bizarre to look at our mind and realize how our attitude can be like driving with the parking break on. This can help us realize we want to change things, including learning to be easier an kind to our self.

Changing things like depression and loneliness takes more than just realizing it's going on... it takes doing something. And this is the weak link of a meditation-only approach. The thing that seems to help depression is decreasing the amount of time worrying and doing more little activities, to get the body and mind doing things and less focused on itself. It is similar to loneliness. What seems to help is decreasing the amount of time worrying and doing more things around people. Little by little, doing some things that seem uncomfortable. Unfortunately, some people think that if you do enough meditation then everything will become comfortable. I personally never experienced that. It's always challenging to do new things. I think meditation helps a little, but we still need to be brave in the middle of feeling some discomfort and attempt to make changes...

Obviously everyone is different and how this change happens will be different for everyone. Some people can just jump in and start making little changes. Some people will use access to health care and can have doctors and therapists help them, then they can also use them to help figure out better nutrition, medication, and therapy techniques to help make change happen. Some people will use exercise. Etc etc. Depression can be challenging, which is why there are professionals who devote their professional life for helping people deal with it. People who have a therapist AND have a meditation practice seem to make the fastest progress, I've noticed. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11722800))

## Not enough honesty, not enough investigation, not enough acceptance.

Meditation basically has three aspects: an honest experience of one's condition and balancing the effort/investigation and the relaxation/acceptance of that condition.

Not enough honesty and it becomes fantasy/spiritual bypassing.

Not enough investigation and it becomes indulgent daydreaming.

Not enough acceptance and it becomes aversive manipulation.

This is basically ignorance, greed, and aversion as applied to practice itself! I agree that after a while, this becomes more of an instinct rather than a practice, so there is less doing of it, but still the activity of it --- and a trusting of that activity. It's basically a situation where the heart/mind has learned that rather than "push away suffering to others" to "turn inward, notice the clinging that causes suffering, and -- seeing it clearly -- it gets dropped". ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6834204)) 

## Motivation Check: don't rely on mediation to fix all your life problems.

The people who really suffer are those that treat meditation/spirituality as something that makes them more and better. More wise, more intelligent, more perceptive, more accomplished, more grounded and better than everyone else without a practice. In essence, their practice is all about getting ahead and separating themselves from the rest of humanity.  
  
The people who seem to make quick work of it are those who already know that life is up and down, fame and blame, wealth and loss, success and failure, but who seem to key into the sense of there being a basic, human sanity that is possible to develop and refine. A sanity that connects to the simplicity of being a perceptive human mind and a simple enjoyment of a human embodied experience. This is more a motivation of "I know I will be better for myself and all beings if I see through my compulsive ideas, behaviors, and endless competition with other people."  
  
Practice "with a gaining idea" or being "spiritually ambitious" can really mess things up.  
  
No one is totally pure of heart, so I'm not saying you need to get rid of your shadow desires before starting --- that's impossible. But I am saying that there should be some humility and groundedness from the beginning, otherwise all of the insights -- which basically destroy conventional defense mechanisms -- will feel like "losses" and instead of feeling intimacy with life, you'll feel isolated and lost.  
  
All of this is paradoxical, so it isn't easy to describe... but although spiritual practice DOES make you feel isolated and lost, if there isn't ambition, it also allows you to better intimately connect. And even though you DO become more wise and perceptive, you also clearly see all of your incomplete development and stupidity. Hopefully it turns you into a good human, but if intentions are all wrong, it can turn you into a neurotic wreck.  
  
In some sense, there really isn't a choice you need to make... life will kinda point to what you probably should do. But, to the extent that you can, think about intentions and consequences. Meditation kinda takes away the ways you can hide, so be clear about what you want to be. Meditation also wakes you up to the life you have, not some other life, so also make sure you are doing your best to make it a good one. Don't rely on mediation to fix all your life problems. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6184257)) 

## Speed of progress and types of meditators.

I think people who make "quick" progress are the same people that become intimate with the actual physical experience of confusion and suffering/ill will in their bodies. To some extent thoughts are analyzed, but it doesn't become an intellectual exercise. There is an intuition that things currently are a confused tangle of sensations and urges and emotions which needs to be seen clearly at the level of sensation, urge, and emotion. And so actual sensations, urges, and emotions become objects of investigation.    
  
I think the people who are going slow -- which is totally fine and something worth considering as a good thing -- are easing into this non-verbal and semi-conscious territory of investigation. It can be terrifying to explore the primal, shadow, non-verbal side of experience. There is no benefit of just retraumatizing ourselves by going too quickly into this difficult stuff. If people are confused about why they might be so slow, they probably need to look at how they are using meditation techniques and maps of meditation... They are often using meditation to avoid experiencing their inner tensions. They are often using the maps of meditation to stay at level of the intellect.  
  
The people who seem to combine morality and meditation well are generally those people who see the nature of urges and emotions very clearly. It becomes very clear how suffering is created when we adopt an orientation of anger, greed, desire, ambitition, and pride (5 realms). It becomes very clear how these orientations can seem like answers to our problems if we don't see the nature of primal defensiveness, evasion, stimulation, busyness, and confusion (5 elements). When you see how our own emotions and urges create suffering when we buy into them... then the alternative  -- which isn't quite definable except by saying it is the middle path -- becomes much clearer. Well, I guess you could say it is friendliness, caring, apprecation, and acceptance (4 bramaviharas).  
  
At it's core, morality is mostly dropping our tendency to resist change, dropping our superficial quests for emotional satisfaction, and dropping the need to "be somebody". Having done that, it then opens up the entire space of being alive and responsive to whatever experience we meet. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7078646))

## Who are the people that seem to make real progress.

In all the years since KFD I've noticed that the people that seem to really progress in meditation practice are the ones who are also very interested in their psychology. Sometimes it's by combining therapy and practice, which is ideal if you can get a good therapist, but other times is just by being psychologically literate and noticing stuff like that while sitting. By psychological literate, I mean understanding things like defense mechanisms, immortality projects, personality disorders, shadow/repression/projection, trauma/PTSD/addiction, etc. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17808044))

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At its core, morality is mostly dropping our tendency to resist change, dropping our superficial quests for emotional satisfaction, and dropping the need to "be somebody". Having done that, it then opens up the entire space of being alive and responsive to whatever experience we meet. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7078646))

## Meditation as a feeding process.

You could say it is that meditation brings the full picture of feeding into clarity, both the obvious side and the shadow side. Feeding makes perfect logical sense and so that's the way we are wired. 99% of the path is all about instinctively learning to feed on more and more refined mind objects. We go through increasing levels of seeking from material desires, to psychological desires, to existential desires. But gradually we see how this whole feeding process is never ending: Samsara. This continuous craving and seeking and obtaining and lacking and craving once again loop goes on and on. At some point in practice the mind even jumps to narrow bandwidths of perception -- jhanas. And even the jhanas take on a more and more refined nature, until getting to things like "neither perception nor not-perception". It really is amazing.

In the end, the mind turns around and looks directly at seeking/craving itself, which we have always felt as self, and sees THAT. It's closer than close, but we "blink" it out of awareness all the time. When we see that, that's basically 4th Path. You can't be confused by mind nature after seeing the craving self. And yet life goes on! ... which is shocking to hear, but as 4th path approaches, so much of the false identifications and limiting views have been seen through, so losing a contiguous sense of self is no big deal.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/3139959))

## Bad habits, lizards & wasps.

Basically, we don't drop these bad habits unless we feel the pain that they cause. It would be nice if we were intelligent beings that responded to reason, because then you could simply say "did you know smoking is bad for you?" and people would quit.  Or we would notice "Oh, I'm 20 pounds overweight" and then we would eat less. But the mind-body doesn't really work that way. Deep down, our brain is a very stupid lizard than needs to be put into direct contact with the negative consequences of its habits otherwise the lizard never changes.

This is why, after a certain point in becoming a mostly-sane person, meditation is >necessary< to make any more progress. All the intellectual and philosophical approaches will somewhat conceptually support training the stupid lizard, but it never quite does the trick.

So we have to sit on a cushion and directly feel our special hells if we want to keep refining our mind.

A lot of it is slowly training the lizard, but lizards are also smart in their own stupid way. If a lizard eats a wasp and gets stung, it won't even try to eat a wasp any more. Many meditation insights are like that. Once we get it, once we are really "stung", we surprisingly find our bad habit suddenly gone. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/13395630))

## When we really see how much we hurt from our bad habits, we automatically make the change.

Most of the time, we don't really notice how much we avoid really experiencing things. That's why there is such a backlog of material that comes bubbling up during meditation … Here's one of my favorite statements by Krishnamurti: “If I recognize that I am crude without wanting to change, without trying to become sensitive, if I begin to understand what crudeness is, observe it in my life from day to day - the greedy way I eat, the roughness with which I treat people, the pride, the arrogance, the coarseness of my habits and thoughts - then that very observation transforms what is”.

“Similarly, if I am stupid and I say I must become intelligent, the effort to become intelligent is only a greater form of stupidity; because what is important is to understand stupidity. However much I may try to become intelligent, my stupidity will remain. I may acquire the superficial polish of learning, I may be able to quote books, repeat passages from great authors, but basically I shall still be stupid. But if I see and understand stupidity as it expresses itself in my daily life - how I behave towards my servant, how I regard my neighbour, the poor man, the rich man, the clerk – then, that very awareness brings about a breaking up of stupidity … Watch yourself talking to your servant, observe the tremendous respect with which you treat a governor, and how little respect you show to the man who has nothing to give you. Then you begin to find out how stupid you are; and in understanding that stupidity there is intelligence, sensitivity”. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17808044))

## “Consistency, not heroics”.

My own advice is to pick a reasonable amount of practice to do a day, like an hour of sitting. And then completely forget about practice for the rest of the time and just really enjoy/participate in your normal everyday life. That's it. I know this sounds contrary to the whole "hardcore" approach, but ultimately I think Kenneth Folk has it exactly right when he says "consistency, not heroics". The thing is, you need to build in a lot of down time to digest and re-wire your body/mind when you're doing meditation practice. This is heavy stuff. Lots a material comes up. Some of this stuff is psychologically really difficult. If you neglect recovery time, then it's just like over-exercising. You make initial progress, but then can't recover and wind up injuring yourself. When mediation gets heavy, there should be lots of recovery time. Lots of walking outside. Lots of sleep. Lots of hot baths. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17808044))    
  
One of the side benefits of regular sitting practice is it gives you feedback on normal stuff that's required to be healthy. When you are sitting there, it becomes clear if you are getting enough sleep, exercise, etc. Sometimes it's even becomes obvious how to adjust your diet to make your mind clearer (lighter meals, less coffee/alcohol, etc.) ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6003541))

## Being heroic, yet loving (towards hindrances).

Progress comes from being heroic (bravely facing what arises) and yet loving (equanimity with what is arising, not manipulating what is occurring, being interested in the details of the experience, not pushing it away). But sometimes you can overload the system and heroism is stupidity. The key thing seems to be whether you can muster enough compassion for what is actually occurring, so that your heroism isn't just stupid bulldozing with fierce determination.

Early in practice, it's all about "overcoming" hindrances: developing a regular sitting schedule, staying on the cushion for the entire time, learning to return to the meditation object when our mind drifts...

But quite soon afterwards -- we get a strong hint of this in the dark night nanas, but we have to keep re-learning it -- it's all about learning the nature of the so-called hindrances. Basically taking the hindrances/suffering AS the meditation object. So the hindrances actually become fuel for practice, not obstacles to practice. It's a great thing when we see this clearly. Practice takes on a whole new momentum and vitality.

Ideally, this bravery and compassion/love that is so essential for sitting practice becomes who we are, our orientation to all of our life, hence why meditation seems to correlate to refinements in morality. Although we can mess this up, too. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6930113))

# Noting

## Different styles of Noting.

There are lots of different noting styles. Ultimately, the goal is be able to have a technique that allows someone to develop momentary concentration and clarity about what is presently occurring.  Lots of ways to miss-use different noting styles, too. Focusing on breath can be dulling if it is used as sort of a mindless mantra and sensations are not seen clearly. Focusing on rapid fire noting could just enhance a busy narrative mind and be superficial. Noting without structure can sometimes lead to an avoidance of certain types of mind objects (e.g., ignoring feelings or not seeing thoughts as thoughts), but Shargrol's structure noting (which actually is very similar to some of Kenneth's teachings) can be too rigid for people past the beginner's stage. My belief is people really don't know a practice well unless they can articulate its downsides, too.

Meditation is like riding a horse --- you want to stay loose in the saddle, but you don't want to fall off. You need relaxation AND alertness. That balance is only something that is learned over time, by hours in the saddle. Same thing with noting practice, it works but it also takes someone willing to put in the time and learn how to balance noting and noticing. It takes hours on the cushion. Shargrol structured noting is really for developing the foundation (or going back to basic for those who over-complicated their noting practice or is less-developed in one of the four categories of mind objects). Mahasi’s Practical Insight Meditation really holds the hand of someone who can notice the ñanas showing up in their practice.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/12855004))

## Shargrol’s Structured Noting Practice Sample.

Noting is simple and powerful, and it's okay to dive in if you are ready. The nice thing about noting is it takes you where you need to go. Something really amazing about the mind sort of points the way. The main challenge is that you must get used to (over time) being on the level of direct experience rather than interpreted experience. The more intimately you can be in experience, the more likely the experiences leading to legitimate insights into the nature of experience happen. The more abstracted and intellectualized the relationship with experience, the more likely experience will be shallow and the insights will be somewhat abstracted or intellectualized. This is a whole different domain than philosophy or therapy. The idealized 1+ hour version of a good noting session is:

1. Let mind get settled into practice mode, slowly letting day's thoughts get replaced with the intention to practice.

2. Let the body get settled. Sit. Rock left and right and forward and backward until you find the place of a stable upright spine. Move your head around until it is centered on your shoulders. Move your shoulders back and down so that they are hanging down and resting on your torso. Rotate your elbows without moving your shoulders and rest your hands in your lap. This should be a good comfortable position.

3. Take slightly longer and deeper breaths, just 20% deeper and hold it 20% longer. Start feeling that combination of relaxation and invigoration.

4. Now let the breath do itself normally. While the body breath itself, feel the relaxation of the out breath and count breaths from 1 to 10. If you miss a count, start over again. If you get to ten, start again at one. No big deal, just be honest. If the body can naturally breath itself and the mind can naturally from 1 to 10 three times then the mind is nicely settled. (It’s easy to get this part wrong by using too much effort. Anyone can count breaths if they use a lot of effort, like a soldier counting push-ups. This breath counting should be basically effortless, the body breathes, the mind counts, no effort.)

From this foundation starts the basic noting phase…

5. For 5 to 10 minutes, have the intention to notice sensations in a very intimate and direct way. On each out breath, note just one of the sensations that is present. This is a very easy rate (10 to 12 times a minute or so) which leaves plenty of time for directly noticing sensations. The mental note is a way to see if you haven’t entered a trance of sorts. If you slip into a trance and are lost in thought or are in a trance and forget to note, then simply note what was distracting you, give yourself a “good job!” feeling for returning to mindfulness, and start noticing sensations again.

6. Next slowly switch into urges and emotions. For 5 to 10 minutes, switch to urges and emotions in the same way. Urges are like little non-verbal motivational intentions that rise up, usually clinging/greed or aversion/resistance. Emotions are longer lasting non-verbal moods or feelings (different than the momentary sensations). If you slip into a trance and are lost in thought or are in a trance and forget to note, then simply note what was distracting you, give yourself a “good job!” feeling for returning to mindfulness, and start noticing urges and emotions again.

7. Next slowly switch into thoughts. For 5 to 10 minutes, switch to “categories of thought” in the same way. In this step you don’t become imbedded in thinking, but you don’t stop it either. You let your mind think the way it naturally does, but you pay attention to it as thinking, and on every outbreath you note the general category of thoughts you are having. You might be planning your day, thinking about the past, worried about making progress, doubting the effectiveness of the method, etc. Perfect! You would simply note “planning thoughts”, “remembering thoughts”, “worrying thoughts”, “doubting thoughts”, etc. You can make up your own categories or style of labels. If you slip into a trance and are lost in thought or are in a trance and forget to note, then simply note what was distracting you, give yourself a “good job!” feeling for returning to mindfulness, and start noticing categories of thought again.

8. At this point, the mind is now very good at being mindful and discriminating (in the good “distinguishing” sense) between  sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts. Now for 5 to 10 minutes, let yourself note any one of these things while you let your body and mind do what it wants. This is basically freestyle noting. If you slip into a trance and are lost in thought or are in a trance and forget to note, then simply note what was distracting you, give yourself a “good job!” feeling for returning to mindfulness, and start noticing and noting again.

This all sounds very easy, but very few people are capable of following the instructions above. Most people jump into freestyle noting, which is totally fine, but you need to be honest and admit if you are having any difficulty with any of the four categories of mind objects. You can't go wrong with checking in on all four before freestyling. But if one of the categories of sensations, urges, emotions, or thoughts is more difficult, you might want to spend more time on it. It might be you spend focused time on sensations and thoughts before going freestyle if you are already good with urges and emotions. . It might be that you need to spend a lot of time on urges or emotions before going freestyle. Etc. Basically, you are trying to design a practice that uncovers what is non-conscious or confused in your experience and what kinds of stuff you avoid by going into a mindless trance. Again, the path and goal is at the level of direct, intimate, visceral experience, including the direct experiencing of thoughts as thoughts. Definitely a different domain than therapy or philosophy (but obviously it supports both of those).

Now for the next phase….

9. Now simply sit for 5 minutes without applying any techniques. Let the mind transition from a practicing mind to a normal mind. Notice what observations from practice linger and what you might want to bring with you off cushion. What can you work on off-cushion during your normal life?

10. Dedicate merit

11. And now let the effort of practice go. It is important to have not practicing time to let the mind non-consciously digest what happens during practice. Yes, it’s okay to work on some stuff off-cushion, but don’t become neurotic or obsessive. Just like with physical exercise, you actually build muscle/mindfulness during your recovery from your workouts/meditation. Sleep is really important, too. Strange things can happen overnight in terms of developing awareness, attention, mindfulness, subtle distinguishing, etc.

The last thing I’ll say is that the direct and intimate experience of sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts are like a gateway. We assume we know what these things are, but honestly we really don’t. If you can simply have the direct experience of these things, then some amazing progress is made and the seemingly mythical progress described in the traditions all makes sense. And practice does lead to ñanas, jhanas, cessations, and awakening. Yes, don’t crave these experiences, but also don’t write them off as unimportant. You’ll be amazed at the powerful experiences that do happen. But the gateway to all of this is simply intimately and directly experiencing sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts. Don’t underestimate the power of doing these very simple practices. Also use caution with these very simple practices, the results can be destabilizing.

In the same way that you tear muscle to build it back to become stronger, you tear apart confusions (fused-with-ness) about experience so that your mind grows clearer. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/12640335))

## Structured vs Unstructured Practice.

A big part of the road to SE is developing a bunch of techniques and learning to intuitively use them. As you are seeing, it can be great to go back to basics sometimes. The simple 1 to 10 (Zen counting) meditation is often given to beginners, but the comfort of having a basic structure and the space around the counting all give a nice frame to even advanced meditator's practice.

The pros of a continuous object is it builds the muscle of attention, the cons of a continuous object will eventually become tiring and oppressive over time.

The pros of a more open non-continuous framework is there is an opportunity for broad awareness to develop, the cons are that it's easier to get lost in vague awareness/dullness.

Expertise in meditation comes from intuitively understanding that there are always + and - for a practice... The pros of noting practice is that i keeps you periodically disembedding from the flow of experience so you don't get too distracted, the cons of noting practice is that it can separate you from the intimate experience of the current moment.

The most basic kind of mediation is a very unstructured "how is the experience of this moment?" or even better "what is the experience of how this moment changes?"  More framework can be added to help the meditator, but no framework is required. We don't even need to have words to explain it, but if we can intimately be with the current moment that's enough. And if we want or could benefit from a framework, then that's fine too. The fundamental nature of the current moment isn't altered or corrupted by what is in it. Another way to say it is the application of the framework is still part of the experience of the changing moment, too. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8196055))

## A great noting practice.

Noting in and out plus other simple notes while watching the breath is a great practice. You can also add some additional notes to help you work on your challenges. For example, if you get lost, make sure you make a note of whatever was occurring during that trance --- was it a pleasurable sensation? a bunch of emotions? a memory? a thought about the future? searching for something to note? a judgement about what was happening? Find a good-enough word or very short expression for what happened, "remembering" "blissing out" "judging" "planning" "searching" etc, and then return to the in/out of the breath.

When noting becomes difficult -- this is very important -- note what is actually causing the difficulty. Note pain, discomfort, frustration, confusion, dullness, controlling, manipulation, effort, etc. In other words, turn your difficulties into notes. That way, even challenges become fuel for noting practice.

If the difficulty becomes too much, then it is okay to go slow or stop. The point here is not to create even more suffering. The point is to better understand the nature of suffering... and the way to do that is to gently go into the experiences that are difficult. Usually we will see that either there is some past fragment of memory or sensation that we still need to digest (basically making peace with things that happen in the past) or there is some resistance or fighting of what is happening. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/9594986))

## Balancing TMI and MCTB approaches.

TMI and MCTB describes two sides of the same coin. TMI is all about adjusting attention/awareness to minimize distractions. MCTB is all about recognizing the flavors of distraction that often corrupts attention/awareness unless it is seen objectively. TMI talks about the nature of attention/awareness, MCTB talks about the nature of distraction, all meditators need to learn to objectify distractions and adjust attention/awareness -- how they choose to abstractly describe that process is a choice.

For what it's worth, I think the balance between the two approaches is keeping attention on the breathing sensations, using that to become settled, and then after that point "noting" whatever is the distraction from that attention on the breath. This is from something I wrote for another yogi:

"When you get distracted from the sensations of breathing, look at your mind and notice some aspect of the distraction and simply label it with a word. The classic types of distractions are: 1) body sensations (discomfort, pleasure, pressure, tingling, itchiness, aches, interesting textures etc.) 2) urges (attraction, aversion, the urge to ignore or overlook) 3) emotions (joy, curiosity, sadness, frustration, confusion, depression, excitement) 4) "proliferation of thought" which is really how our mind just kind of creates a whole series of thoughts without really "thinking/analyzing" but rather just "work today was stupid I had to make that call and he wasn't there and now I need to send an email and..." What we do for that kinds of distraction, for example, is we just label the whole string of thoughts as one thing "work thoughts".

So to put this all together... You sit and let your body get settled for about 5 or 10 minutes. (Don't worry about how long, just let your body and mind calm down from all the stress of the day.) Then transition into mindfulness of breathing. Do that until you feel ready for the next step, maybe 5 or 10 more minutes. Next, keep doing the same thing, but now whenever you are distracted, notice the nature of the distraction, and just label one aspect of it, a sensation, an urge, an emotion, or a category of thinking. Make up whatever label makes sense to you -- there are no rules here. The point is to be able to more clearly see and understand what distracts you.

And here's the interesting thing: you should have no worries about how many times you get distracted. In fact, you should even think "I hope I get distracted a lot, so I can have lots of opportunities to clearly see what distracts me."

(Adding in: and I do really recommend the 5 minutes of sitting without using a method at the end. Oddly enough, this seems to really catalyzes progress.)

So that's what I would recommend as a next step. This practice does two things. It adds in "vipassana" or insight practice to your breath meditation which is mostly a "samatha" or calming practice. But the coolest thing about it is it allows you to use distractions as fuel for practice, because you turn all the things that distract, frustrate, confuse, depress, worry etc. into things that you note and label with a word and use to make your mindfulness practice stronger."

Hopefully you can see that there are ways to tweak practice to fit the individual yogi and that having an intentional structure really reduces the tendency to kind of be lazy during big parts of hour long sits. It is often better to do a good 45 minute sit rather than sit too long. All a longer sit does in this circumstance is train the being-lazy behavior.

So for example, during your tranquilizer dart sit, if you spent that sit doing mindfulness of breathing, but then noted all the sensations, emotions, and thoughts which made up the overall sense of being tranquilized. Noting something at least as often as every outbreath, or even a little more frequently to ramp up the energy of attention. That's the gateway to either moving from dissolution to misery (in the progress of insight stages) or your dullness would turn into the airy, tingly, and cool body tone of the third vipassana jhana. You don't need to change anything about those kind of sits, except ramp up the mindfulness of the experience, so that it becomes an intimate object of investigation. In other words, you change a dull trance into mindfulness of the experience and the inimate mindfulness will induce further concentration. If you never quite break out of the dull trance after 45 minutes, end it there. No sense training yourself to be in a trance. If it happens again, then practice in the standing position.

You see, a yogi has to learn how to adjust both effort and method to the conditions that arise during practice. A teacher can definitely help, but so much of this is true trial and error on behalf of the meditator. We all need to learn how to meet our own experience and intuitively learn to use different "tools" to break out of trance and cultivate mindfulness. Sometimes I think meditator aren't given enough of an endorsement to make the practice into their own art. But it really is an art, not a formula.

And it's very subtle, because mindfulness of a trance-like state looks and feels a lot like being in a trance, but the attention/awareness has a definite flavor of "knowing" the trance. So every state is workable, we just need to get the energy of attention higher that the intensity of the trance. The trance doesn't need to completely go away. In fact, you kinda want it to stick around so you can really investigate it -- why is it so seductive?, what lies does it tell about itself?, what does this numbness want to hide or protect?, how is this trance a confused form of compassion?, what if I had compassion for the natural instinct to go into trance but looked at what is happening objectively?, is this trance really going to relieve tension, resistance, suffering, problemness, etc? If you get interested in the what and why, even "difficult" sits are very very engaging! ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/9981226))

## A potential problem with ‘Just Relax’ practices.

Different teachings work for different people. ‘Just Relax’ is a great teaching for people who have a sharp mind but too much energy... but for some people that teaching just leads to a bunch of "meditators" who just wallow in dullness. the problem with the ‘Just Relax’ teaching is some/many people, after they have reduced their tension somewhat, do not look for and notice subtle greed, aversion, and indifference. It's basically a continuation of letting go of bigger tensions, but the benefits are much more profound. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8317313)) 

## Alternating Samatha and Dzogchen.

 Some say that in a perfect world, Samatha + Dzogchen would be an ideal practice. I really empathize with that sentiment. I felt very much the same way a long time ago --- all the more complicated methods seemed to be another layer applied on top of experience. (I've modified that view over time, but I very much get your point.)  
  
My overarching view right now is that almost all meditation methods will hit you at the level you \_can\_ work. So I'm much more inclined to recommend people follow their interest, do the work they can do with the practice that interests them, and then re-assess every few months. The point is to stay interested and stay practicing. This requires a level of honest however. If someone is merely reading about interesting practices and doesn't have a daily sit -- i.e., if they aren't practicing and just trying to intellectually figure out psychology, adult development, and awakening -- then "following their interests" is really just intellectual entertainment. It's fine, no big deal, but it probably won't lead anywhere...  
  
So loosely speaking:  
  
For Dzogchen... Do you understand the basic idea that mental objects self-liberate? That they are empty displays of mind? Can you simply sit and watch mind objects come and go? Can you mostly let yourself rest in experience? (You don't have to be perfect! )  
  
For Samatha... Can you notice that when there are resistances to experience, when there is tension not resting, can you accept that they arise as part of habitual patterns? Can you trust that awareness of those patterns -- not applying some kind of antidote, but rather clearly seeing those patterns -- is what will ultimately release those patterns? And so, can you simply accept these flaws and imperfections and let them be dissolved in awareness over time without resisting their arising? Can you remember to relax into experience, just as it is? (You don't have to be perfect!)  
  
It seems like a good pattern of practice would be letting the two methods alternate -- "clear seeing" when you can, "noticing tension and then having the intention to not resist" when you must.  
  
If you can do this with consistency, it will feel like psychological "knots" and emotional "confusions" will start bubbling up and will untangle by themselves. This is a very serious yet playful practice -- not much to do, no roadmap to follow, just trusting that your inner wisdom and awareness is enough, that all it takes is time for the knots and confusions to bubble into consciousness and be seen as displays of mind and be self-liberated. Most knots and confusions don't let go the first time you see them, so don't get frustrated or think you are doing it wrong. Things take time. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7138321))

# Teachers & Students

## Finding a teacher.

Finding a teacher, mentor, spiritual friend(s) is probably the most significant thing that will help your practice at a certain point. Of course, not all teachers are a good match … The one thing I always advise is "never give away your power" to a teacher. Don't let them tell you what to do, what to think, how to feel, etc. Their role is to provide good advice, which when tested through practice time leads to better practice and more independence for you. You get to decide if their advice is helpful and if after testing it for a reasonable amount of time it is not helpful, politely end the teacher-student relationship. Rule #1: If you find yourself becoming more dependent on a teacher and doubting more and more your own abilities as a meditator, i.e. you feel less independent and less sane --- get the fuck out. The teacher must inspire confidence and growing independence. And if the teacher is violating basic respect for your finances, emotions, family and friend relationships, psychology, privacy, etc --- get the fuck out. Remember that they should be even more respectful than your friends in this regard, so if you wouldn't be friends with a person acting this way, don't have them for a teacher. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8415972))

## Teachers and Camping.

It's like the boy-scout motto for campsites: teachers should leave the students better than when they first found them. And it's like camping: you don't become a great camper by living forever in the first campsite you encounter. It's okay to camp in other campsites. You can have several teachers in a lifetime. A good teacher will want to empower a student to explore and own their own development, even if it means leaving the teacher-student relationship. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8415972))

## Working with a good teacher is very much like a traditional apprenticeship.

I trained with a few pragmatic teachers... For what it's worth, it is very rare for a teacher to go into the nuances of technique, even pragmatic dharma teachers, because in theory, the techniques of meditation are very simple: pay attention, fully experience, notice where there is resistance, notice what the resistance feels like, and fully experience that resistance. And also because the whole point of meditation is to have a bunch of problems and then investigate the nature of those problems.

Typically when you work with a pragmatic teacher (I'm not going to recommend any particular teachers, but everyone I've worked with is well-known and can be found with basic pragmatic dharma, personalized meditation googling), you schedule "check-ins" every week or two or three (the better meditator you are, the longer between check-ins). During the week, let's say, you practice daily and do the best you can. Then when you meet, you describe how the week went and any particular problem you might be having. A lot of the time the teacher will say "that sounds like good practice" and remind you about basic meditation instructions. Many times problems come from forgetting to do the basic instructions in the heat of a "bad" meditation. Sometimes they give encouragement, but they can also be kind of cold…

But then the most important thing happens after you have had a problem for a while yet continue to practice... only then will the teacher point out something very subtle, some kind of habit or resistance you have but never noticed, and here's the important thing: you needed to have the problem for a while for it to become noticeable.

So my experience is that working with a good teacher is very much like a traditional apprenticeship -- you don't get a lot of hand-holding but you do get good advice when it's appropriate. But a lot of the time, it's you trying to figure it out on your own --- which actually trains you to be independent and own your practice. A teacher that tries to be helpful all the time creates a horrible dependency in their students, which is just about the worst possible thing for a meditator.

Meditation practice is like shooting free-throws -- it involves a lot of very simple actions, it's very clear when things are going through the hoop or not, and when they are not, you need to do more free-throws and "feel" your way to a better shot. No teacher can give you the feel.  But every so often, a teacher/coach will mention something simple "you need to soften your hand" or "don't tense your forehead" and it's only because you have done so many free-throws that those simple suggestions actually make a difference.

To me there are a few real benefits in working with a teacher:

(1) owning your practice - you have to contact them, work with them, and decide if it is worth it. You have to take the steps to research, choose, work with a teacher for a while, and decide if it is worth it. You might have to say "nope, this isn't working for me. I have to end working with this guy". or "dang, she is really good. I can tell. I just need to trust this gal for three months try to practice exactly as she says". You can’t turn off your critical thinking. It keeps you in the role of being responsible for yourself.

(2) understanding "good fit" - the teacher will also decide if they think they can work with you. They know that a miss-match in interests and approach will simply waste both people's time. You can learn a lot by being interviewed and rejected by a teacher. This often happens.

(3) accountability.- it sucks to have a skype call and say you blew off practice for a few days in the previous week. For most people, this makes you practice more consistently.

(4) they help you adjust your practice or use a new practice that fits your interests, goals, and the types of problem you have. The worst teachers will force you to do their technique and assume any problem you have is because you are a bad student. The best teachers have a variety to suggest and if there isn't a good match, they may say "it's not worth it for you to train with me anymore. but you might want to check out..." -- they recognize there are thousands of ways to approach meditation.

(5) they normalize the difficult and weird stuff that happens during meditation practice and during life as a meditator ("yeah, I had that problem for six months, it passed." "yeah, having images of eyes looking at you when you close your own eyes is strange," "yeah, it can be really blissful sometimes", etc.)

(6) and lastly, they force you to work on your own problems -- the sign of a good teacher is they keep you struggling but interested. A bad teacher will spoon feed you intellectual answers or give you too many practice instructions. All of us have to (productively) struggle through meditation, the struggle is where we learn about how we create our own suffering. If a student isn't willing to struggle a little, traditional meditation probably isn't the best practice for them.

No matter what, meditation is going to be a struggle. A teacher can never take that away (and shouldn't). But it should be a productive struggle. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/13702125))

## Three levels of being empowered.

The first is direct, like the Zen idea of "action" -- that there isn't a separate self that does an action, but rather there is aware action itself. Not unconscious or trance state, but awake.

The second is self, where one's own self does an activity as "a self doing an activity", for its own sake, for its own exploration, taken up and left behind without complication. But this has some suffering in it, the pain of birth and death of an identity associate with the activity. Make it harder to drop it when the activity isn't needed anymore because it feels like a little death.

The third is the internally mediated approach, were we mimic others/look for their approval --- which must be related to the innate behavior of children imitating adults as a way to learn about the world. This is much more painful, because it's infused with a kind of paranoia. "Am I doing it right? Do other approve? What if I'm not good enough?" When you are an adult, however, maybe it's time to see through the limitations of that approach, or at least use it consciously rather than unconsciously. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/3139959))

## My favorite books.

MCTB2 by Daniel Ingram. “Wake Up to Your Life” by Ken McLeod. “Essential Wisdom Teachings” by Peter Fenner. “The Inner Game of Tennis” by Timothy Gallwey (seriously, really good!). “Think on these things” by Krishnamurti. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17808044))

I'm a big fan of Ken McLeod's book "Wake Up to your Life".  It is basically a description of the Tibetan three year retreat and it is written without a lot of jargon or metaphysics. So far it's one of the best books I've read, maybe tied with Daniel Ingram's MCTB2. WUTYL is very good because it presents a broad discussion of foundational practices before talking about Mahamudra, so the reader has a sense of what needs to be in place before getting the most out of MM. There's no big problem with using MM before a foundation is in place, but the practice will be more like "mindfulness" than true MM. So no harm, but perhaps less benefit...

I've found that when people are interested in this stuff, they'll use a book like WUTYL as a menu of different practices and will jump around doing what is interesting. And then eventually they reach a point where they realize they need to work with a teacher to figure out what they are missing. It really is a great book. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/15804817))

## Cook-Greuter: Nine Levels of Increasing Embrace In Ego Development: A Full-Spectrum Theory Of Vertical Growth.

Babies have no self, but there are urges. Following their urges, toddlers develop a self. As language develops, they learn and engage in constant self-narration/self-talk. ("I put this box on this box. I walk now. I am hungry.") That self-talk and pure emotionality becomes our early sense of self. Teenagers and adults develop refinements on the narrative self by expanding categories of thought and complexity of thought, while developing distance from purely reactive emotionality, but still have the core "narrator/observer". Pretty much all of adult life is about developing and protecting a superior sense of self, for all the benefits and suffering it brings.

Meditation puts the spotlight on inner experience as an experience, which in a sense turns it into an outer experience. Maladaptive self strategies become really obvious (like trying to be "100% good" or suppressing emotions, or denying our actual ambitions) and get refined, spurring adult development.

Eventually the effort involved in reflexively holding and protecting a sense of self becomes more obvious, along with developing a familiarity with "the void" when no selfing occurs. It's sloppy to say this, but you could say that enlightenment is basically being okay with a sense of self coming and going, without feeling fear of annihilation, along with the other associated maturation that occurs during the road to enlightenment.  [This Cook-Greuter article argues quite persuasively for this view](http://www.cook-greuter.com/Cook-Greuter%209%20levels%20paper%20new%201.1'14%2097p%5B1%5D.pdf). 

## On Morality and Interdependence.

I finally read Wilfred M. McClay's article: [The Strange Persistence of Guilt](https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-post-modern-self/articles/the-strange-persistence-of-guilt) . Pretty deeply flawed. Basically says we need a Judeo-Christian metaphysics in order to be responsible people, because a sense of guilt is needed to correct for sinful actions and guilt is only possible with the framework of god. But I think a number of frameworks can work, including the Buddhist idea of seeing the inherent suffering of actions that are colored by greed, aversion, and indifference. There are many systems, including Christian monasticism, which shows that by looking at your actual lived experience, you can refine your moral compass. It becomes clear that our lives are interdependent and that we cannot hurt others and remain unhurt. The metaphysics for this are many and varied, but almost unimportant.   
  
The author also makes the fatal flaw in not realizing that Freud's critique of civilization (that it requires the sublimation of passions into socially acceptable forms) is equally applicable to any authoritative structure including religions. Unless someone does their own introspection and investigation, all authority structures create a shadow side of repressed emotions/desires, victim identities, and possibilities for claiming exemption from responsibility. We've seen this time and time again in Christianity and pretty much every other religion under the sun including Buddhism. There is plenty of victim identity in Christianity and Buddhism.  
  
The author really mischaracterized Freud, Nietzsche, and athiest critiques of religious/cultural guilt -- perhaps we need enough emotional guilt to motivate responsible action, certainly in our developmental years, but an oppressive sense of guilt is not helpful and there are more adult ways to develop further responsibility than emotional guilt. Nietzsche was critiquing this oppressiveness, Freud was identifying this oppressiveness as a part of the self (Superego) but recognized that there was some validity in the Superego if it was moderated (Ego).   
  
Finally, he author wants the reader to really believe that our current world has more oppressive guilt, but I don't get that impression reading about recent history... seems like there was plenty of guilt in recent history as well as the distant path. I'm sure that a farmer spending a lifetime raising sentient animals for slaughter felt the guilt. I'm sure that a woman giving birth to many children only to see most of them suffering and dying before adulthood also felt the guilt. I really don't believe there is such thing as "more" emotion in a given time period. The specifics change, the emotion is timeless.  
  
So I conclude that the author is basically arguing that we need belief in a god for practical reasons, that's his purpose in writing an essay. I don't think he's successfully argued it …  okay, on closer looking, I agree that he wasn't explicitly arguing for return to a belief in god/sin... He's really saying, hey sin/god worked, what we have isn't god and it isn't working, and I don't know what else would work. So, I was inferring a position he didn't explicitly state, but I feel it is not unreasonable to say it is implied.   
  
So here's the odd thing... if he was simply talking about the global scope of the consequences of our actions and the need to be responsible at that scale, then that would be fairly straightforward article, right? But I feel this article is doing something else by creating straw man arguments (an intentionally misrepresented proposition that is set up because it is easier to defeat than an opponent's real argument) about psychology, atheism, etc. and using the language of guilt, sin etc.   
  
Regarding the "what do we do?" question. Honestly, the basic answer is "be suspicious of things that are convenient", "recognize the mass effect of your actions", "understand the life span of materials", and "basic sanity/renunciation".   
  
This modern world gobbles up resources so easily because all the systems are in place to make it easy. Capitalism has been wonderful in making it easy to buy a 25 cent pencil that contains paint from oil from the middle east, rubber from Africa, graphite from somewhere else, wood from somewhere else, all shipped to a manufacturing plant and then shipped and trucked to a store. Amazing. But then it's easy to treat a pencil like it is only worth 25c -- but really it is creating effects around the entire world. It's easy to always grab a plastic bag whenever you go to the grocery and buy vegetables. They're free. But they are not impact free. etc.  
  
The next is to imagine that the world is full of 9 billion "you"s. So imagine everything you do done by 9 billion people. Imagine that if you re-used a plastic bag three times, then suddenly the world is using 1/3 less bags. If you have 10 kids, then the world is now 45 billion people (replacing two adults with 10 kids = 5x growth). If you have marble countertops an entire mountain of marble has to be levelled. Thinking of it that way helps us see the mass effect of our personal decisions.  
  
The next is to understand the lifetime of materials. Anything made of wood needs to last longer than the tree that made it or it is unsustainable. Anything made of stone and metal will be sustainable if it last as long as it takes for the next mountain to grow. Anything made of geological oil is sustainable if it lasts until more organic material can be buried and crushed by the earth's weight. Plant oils and fibers have a quicker lifecycle.   
  
Renunciation really is a beautiful thing in the way I'm using it, basically the same thing as the Shaker's "simplicity". People really complicate their lives with material stuff. But the only way to really be secure getting out of the rat race is to deeply connect with the absence of greed, aversion, and delusion --- otherwise you'll always feel some kind of lack that you need to fill with stuff. It takes very little to maintain sane humans. You can't make other people sane, you are unavoidably responsible for working toward your own sanity.  
  
And a big part of being sane is to recognize that what happens in this world is beyond your control and you are a mortal being, so make your limited time on this earth a good one and don't expect that your life can be without challenges. Search for ways to have good and better problems, not "no problems" because that is impossible.   
  
I guess another way to say this is: become very intimate with interdependence. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8498401))

# Maps

## Why Maps.

 The maps are useful like a 2D topographic map is useful for understanding 3D terrain, even though a topo map doesn't have individual trees, plants, animals, clouds, smells, etc on the map. The best thing about the maps is what they >provoke< in us. If there is curiosity or a sense that more might be possible, that's worth checking out. No one is able to practice for us, so these maps need to be used to inform our own practice as inspired by our inner conscience about these things. If the maps aren't helpful or meditation is of no interest -- that's fine. It's a big universe with lots of things to do. But if this pursuit is a calling and meditation is part of your daily life, then these maps are wildly helpful, even with the gray areas.

I still remember what it was like trying to figure this stuff out and practice well before 2007(?) when MCTB1 came out. The difference in my own practice between pre- and post-MCTB was like night and day. Still as difficult and challenging as ever, but I was able to orient myself and better understand where to look for subtle ill-will and fantasy. I am very thankful for Daniel's book (MCTB2) and even though I'm reading it very slowly and reading the sections out of sequence, I'm enjoying version 2. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/10271314))

## About maps.

In general, the maps don't work too well for non-retreat practice. In home practice, the mind tends to move up and down the ñanas in a much more unpredictable ways... and people don't tend to have a "place" on the map that is stable … It's my experience that the distractions and variabilities in non-retreat life has an effect on being able to precisely map where people are. That said, the progress of insight maps are the best thing available, so basically those are good guidelines, just know that it's going to be more sloppy in actual experience. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17842329))

The Progress of Insight (POI) map only reliably works for First Path. The POI map somewhat works for Second Path but the practitioner will likely experience more vipassana jhanas than the dry ñanas. The POI map is almost not applicable to 3rd and 4th Paths. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8631371))

## Map-obsession and noting thoughts.

Map-obsessions can be fine during free-reading time, but they really are a hindrance during sitting practice or retreat. If you are thinking, you aren't collecting new data about the current moment. Even strategizing about practice is largely unhelpful. This is where noting practice can really short circuit and contextualize the whole obsession. Simply note/label "mapping thoughts", "judging thoughts", "comparing thoughts", "strategizing thoughts", etc. as these big blocks of thoughts come up. So, if find yourself coming out of a trance where you had spent the last 2 minutes thinking about where you are on the map, note "mapping thoughts" and then return to whatever your meditation object/anchor like the sensations of breathing in the nose or belly, or body scanning, or whatever.   
  
If your mindfulness is strong, you may not need to label it, but just notice oh, look at the mind doing those mapping thoughts, judging thoughts, comparing thoughts again. You can even take those thoughts as objects --- obviously this is only possible with strong EQ/mindfulness. To further objectify discursive thinking and use a slightly "inquiry" based approach, you can even take the orientation or internally say "oh, I wonder what my next thought will be?" These last two approaches shouldn't be rushed, they aren't any better than simply noting what occured with a label and returning to the meditation object. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/9494167))

## Climbing up the ñanas is not so linear.

The tricky thing about at-home practices is the climb up the nanas isn't so linear. It's actually very common to start over from mind and body each time you sit down, but the movement through the early nanas can be very quick. It's very common to go through multiple A&Ps and multiple Dark Nights and multiple Equanimities as one progress toward Stream Entry. Interestingly, 99% of the benefits of practice actually come from the early nanas, not SE. SE is kinda like getting a diploma after 4 years of school. You don't learn anything from your diploma.

One of the main problems with using the maps is people look for and try to find the sensations/emotions/thoughts that match the stage that they think is next. Experience always has some elements of the various nanas, so it's very easy to selectively see what you are looking for. This selective looking will eventually stall out. It's much better to get intimate with the whole experience, all the randomness, all the +/-/neutral sensations, all the chaos of moods, all the monkey mind of thought. Seeing the truth of what is going on matters most.

The person that would make the quickest progress would be someone who never knew the maps and simply noticed what was actually occurring as it occurred. That way there isn't another conceptual overlay, judgement, interpretation of the experience. So the maps are very much a double edged sword. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6184257))

## The goal is not to bypass ñanas.

Getting "stuck in a ñana" could also be described as "learning a ñana" or "developing knowledge of the ñana". There is something in these mind states that need to be experienced before they are understood and sometimes it takes a while before we understand. The goal is not to bypass ñanas but rather to fully experience and understand the ñanas. And it's interesting how the mind seems to know where to go to give us the lesson we need. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11988323))

The fractal nature of a ñana is simply the progression of understanding: first there is the basic effort to see the ñana, then there is the powering-up of investigation and a fast growth in understanding, then there is the collapse of what we are capable of and a need to develop new ways of thinking about the ñana, then there is the mature stage where the simplistic view of the ñana is replaced with much more nuanced and wise. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11988323))

## Concentration and ñanas.

If you do not have strong concentration (centering and relaxing) then you will experience the progression as the vipassana ñanas, i.e. the ñanas (mind and body, cause and effect, three characteristics, arising and passing, dissolution, fear, disgust, misery, desire for deliverance, reobservation, equanimity).

If you have strong concentration, then you experience Vipassana Jhanas, i.e. 1) mind and body, cause and effect, and three characteristics will also have aspects of the first vipassana jhana, 2) arising and passing will have aspects of the second vipassana jhana, 3) dissolution, fear, disgust, misery, desire for deliverance and reobservation will have aspects of the third vipassana jhana, and 4) equanimity will be equanimity which is basically the fourth vipassana jhana.

If you have very strong concentration, then you experience the samatha jhanas.

What happens in practice is we move in and out of concentration as we go up and down the ñanas, so it can be a confusing mix of ñana and jhana... but in time it becomes more obvious.

As Daniel Ingram describes: “The Vipassana Jhanas are like the Samatha Jhanas in some ways, but they involve direct perception of the Three Characteristics of sensations: impermanence at a very fine level (many times per second), no-self (that things arise on their own and are not an observer), and suffering (the fundamental painful tension created by how the mind holds itself to prop up the illusion of a self, center-point, agent, observer, doer, etc.). Each jhana has its sub-jhana aspects, like finer parts of a fractal. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11219298))

## Variety of Maps: the priests argue, but the monks agree.

Detailed maps definitely are more applicable to specific practices... but even so, there is so much similarity that I really don't find it hard to understand other traditions maps. It's the old saying "the priests argue, but the monks agree" -- as soon as you get into semantics it becomes endlessly debatable, but in terms of experiences, it's very easy to understand.  
  
Take a totally different tradition - Kashmir Shaivism. People should still be able to recognize the progression of more and more subtle sense of self... basically going from conventional duality, to more of a witness consciousness, to more of a rarified consciousness (god consciousness, all objects as god/luminosity), and then a unity consciousness which is almost like the original duality consciousness yet something appreciated that wasn't appreciated before, that THIS IS IT. So very much the same arc of progress. [Batgap: Panel Discussion on Kashmir Shaivism](https://batgap.com/igor-kufayev-2/).  Or as another fairly different model, Shingon, you can see the same trajectory over their 10 stages: [Ten levels of Mind](https://www.hokai.info/2011/12/ten-levels-of-mind/) .   
  
... I'm happy to notice the general correlations and patterns and to think it's neat and feel a warm fuzzy feeling about humanity. But yeah, I also notice how the mind seeks patterns and finds them, very dependent origination-ish-ly. This is probably what is at the heart of the buddhist caution about believing "views".   
  
Classic parable: A man was walking alone down a forest path. The Devil and his assistant were following at a distance. The man bends over and picks up something. The Devil's assistant, horrified, exclaims, "Oh no, Master! The man has discovered Truth!" The Devil smiles and says, "Don't worry, I'll help him organize it." ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6769804))

# Stream Entry

## A&P and energetic spots.

If you are getting vibrations in the third eye area, just use those as the mediation object and become intimate and absorbed in them. No need to "deconstruct" them using any intellectual paradigm (e.g. 3 Characteristics). Just get curious about the nature of the vibrations and the gaps in between. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6391026))

## Kundalini is very stage-dependent.

Most people experience Kundalini stuff in a very stage-dependent way. Adults will occasionally pass through the A&P and will experience the blissful, energetic, and visual aspects of that stage. It all feels very "spiritual". Some people will then try to recreate those experiences and get trapped in cycles of no motivation, motivation and A&P, then dark night with no guidance, then no motivation again... and this could be their entire spiritual life. They might deride people who have gone past this, because deep down they are convinced that this is all there is.

If people find a spiritual practice that includes valuing sitting through the dark night and keeping practice going during equanimity, then they have a shot at equanimity, high equanimity, and stream entry. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/3795572))

## Kundalini symptoms: nothing wrong or insightful, just the body rewiring itself.

There will always be new sensations as the body re-wires itself (post SE), so in that sense Kundalini is inevitable -- it's happened to everyone I know with a long-term practice.  
  
But it also seems like resisting and indulging make it worse. Sometimes people try to forcibly ground themselves and that effort makes it worse. Sometimes people try to make it happen more extremely and more quickly and that effort makes it worse.  
  
The people that seem to get through it best are ones that have time to stay gently physically active (walking, working) during the day, use something other than the Kundalini  symptoms as mediation objects, eat good food, and then let themselves rest at night. Sleeping can be goofy, but it is important to slightly fatigue the body during the day and also have enough food and rest/sleep where the mind can do it's modifications.   
  
People tend to make things >>worse<<< by exercising too hard and exhausting themselves, focus on the Kundalini symptoms as meditation objects, eating too little and/or just fruit/carbs, and not letting themselves lie down for long enough during the night.    
  
Basically, a lot of the time people resist or indulge in Kundalini symptoms and that makes it worse. It's important to understand that there is nothing "wrong" or "insightful" about Kundalini symptoms, it's just the body rewiring itself. Unfortunately, there is too much legend about K that makes it seem like a super special thing, but it's closer to the body farting as it is digesting food. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7095859)) 

## Eventually all these kinds of experience become the new normal or are no big deal.

We're all going to want to experience cool stuff and make progress... so we look for confirming experiences. Totally natural. As you continue, you'll have many many many experiences that will line up with all the things you've read about. The meditation path is a weird combination of "wow!" and "oh, that's it?". Eventually all these kinds of experience become the new normal or are no big deal.  
  
There are whole traditions that make these side effects into some metaphysical model of reality (e.g., the body really has chackras, which have particular colors, which have particular spins and frequencies...) but with more experience you'll see that there is some general basis for this, but reality is a lot more complicated/sloppy.  
  
I really like the idea that most of these things are artifacts of the body/mind complex re-wiring itself, side effects so to speak. Most people's body/mind goes through a period of change during 1st and 2nd paths especially. The general domain of 3rd is usually less body-changing and more perception-changing. The general domain of 4th tends to make the body go flat for a while, followed by a rapid recalibration, followed by much more groundedness/stability/resilience.  
  
Taken as a whole it sounds like a lot of change, but it just happens one day at a time... not too different than being a teenager again. Kenneth Folk sometimes compares it to going through puberty -- and that's about right. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6184257))

## A&P – Dark Night loop.

Effort is fine and good, but there is a limit to what you can "make happen" on a retreat. The big difference between a dark night yogi and someone who reaches SE is the ability to become intimate with what is occurring in experience, but without struggle or striving --- this is equanimity. And the ability to dwell in equanimity it’s what makes people prone to SE. It’s very common for people to want to try harder and harder and harder to be unaware that this whole effort is often a way to cover up the feelings that come out on retreat, like shame and guilt and misery and feeling that we are bad meditators. This is what makes someone get trapped as a dark night yogi. The feel all the dark feelings and then they try harder. We push those feelings aside and try harder! This exactly the WRONG thing to do.

The dark night stages are a time when we need to continue to welcome all the dark stuff in our psyche to come out, but to do so in an intelligent and adult way. We need to welcome the laziness, fear, misery, disgust, and frustration into our meditation ---- and study it! What does it feel like when we have these feelings, what thoughts are associated with the feelings, why are these states so seductive and powerful? How does greed, aversion, and indifference work during these feelings/stages? How do our emotions keep us trapped in samsara?

In other words, the dark night is where we learn all of the lessons that limit our meditation and our life. If we go rushing past all of that, we will never develop the stability to dwell in equanimity and reach SE. If people try to rush past the dark night stages and jump to SE, what usually happens is they get caught in a loop where they go through dark night stages, but go back to A&P because they are not relaxing into EQ. When that happens, all sorts of spiritual and psychic experience happen --- which feels like progress because it is so different from normal reality. But when an experience meditator sees this, we know that the person is running away from fully experiencing difficult dark night emotions, and is trying way too hard.

The mind is MUCH MUCH MUCH smarter than we are. All we need to do is pay attention to what naturally arises on retreat. Simply doing this for 16 hours a day while walking, siting, shitting, peeing, eating, and bathing is more than enough to give you the necessary centering and relaxing to reach SE.

When we finally learn to not be seduced by the dark mode AND not try to avoid dark mode, then we can stay with any sensation, urge, emotion, or thought that arises, which is equanimity. Then this deepens and our whole experience becomes Equanimeous, which is the stage of Equanimity. And when we dwell in EQ long enough, really relaxing and soaking it it, then our mind might jump to SE. There is nothing you can do to make SE happen, except practice gently and consistently and make friends with the dark mode and to dwell in EQ when things become Equanimeous. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/view_message/17349762))

## Dark Night.

The main thing is to not take the attitude of "dealing with it" but rather to think of the dark night as an opportunity and to "learn from it and master it". All the primal dark night urges/emotions/thoughts that come to the surface are EXACTLY the kind of stuff that humans need to learn to see clearly and make friends with if we're ever going to become more than barely-intelligent monkeys. The stuff of the dark night are all the human triggers that send us into trance or traumatic over-reaction, and there is no way to develop a stable and courageous mind unless we can handle these things. So the dark night is a great opportunity. That's the way to think of it. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17985831))

There can be a lot of benefit in studying the dark night stages and then writing out how this shows up in your life... and how to meet those challenges. Like if misery totally dominated your psyche, what would that look like? What are your misery triggers? How does misery show up in sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts? What is the best thing about misery? What is the worst? What allows you to simply be with experiences of misery? What would like to learn more about the whole mechanism of a state of misery? What do you tend to avoid or ignore about misery?   This kind of analysis helps you sensitize yourself to the sorts of things you might experience, how you might react, how you might sabotage yourself, how you might learn something about yourself. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17985831))

A dark night yogi basically needs to develop a very consistent daily practice, never missing a day, never quitting too soon. That's a little bit of an exaggeration, but essentially correct. They need to be dedicated to objectifying the "dark" or "negative" aspects of their thoughts/emotions and develop tools (jhana, metta) and have access to high-quality support: teachers & dharma friends. They need to read texts that support the >actual stuff< that is showing up and difficult, which could be reading about the ñanas or particular psychological disorders/treatment methods. And they need to think of their practice as a life-long practice of healing and growth. Otherwise they binge and purge with practice, trying too hard and then not enough, being "heroic" which usually fails, instead of being "consistent" which usually works. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8415972))

A dark night yogi is so classic for anyone hanging on this board (DhO) that it's almost a 80% chance that it is the case. Yes, it's completely also consistent with depression, post-trauma, bipolar, mania, etc etc so it makes no sense to completely attribute it to some meditation thing ---- but then again meditation has also been around a lot longer than psychological diagnoses, so it's also interesting to ponder how much of "spirituality" is an ancient form of post trauma healing and a framework for cognitive development...

It's interesting to notice how much of manic/depression cycles are similar to dark night cycles. It's interesting to watch the mind go through this while on retreat where you can really observe how the mind creates problems that are not there, as a dysfunctional form of coping with uncertainty... it's a wild thing to observe happing in your own mind, while sitting in a beautiful mediation room, on nice soft cushions, being served vegetarian food three times a day, wow -- where does all this drama and suffering come from? All I can say is that there is a certain kind of logic the mind has, even when it is completely dysfunctional, but it takes a lot of sitting and observing to tease it out and notice: oh, the mind/ego is just trying to protect itself from fear and shame and "others".... ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/13846562))

## Urges, emotions, and thoughts.

It’s both true and untrue that body scans make the affect conscious. In theory, it definitely should work this way, but I've also encountered enough people that seem to be perfectly able to experience sensations and yet be blind to emotions, or urges, or thoughts. So I think it's possible that, for some people, they can connect with body sensations and never quite access suppressed/repressed emotions and thoughts. It surprised me the first time I encountered it, someone being able to tell me phenomenologically what they were experiencing in terms of sensations, but when I asked them if they noticed they were adverse/angry (which was obvious) they didn't connect to it. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/14719066))

It surprised me the first time I encountered it, someone being able to tell me phenominologically what they were experiencing in terms of sensations, but when I asked them if they noticed they were adverse/angry (which was obvious) they didn't connect to it. I also remember someone who could connect to was obviously doubting, uncertain, and always mapping/comparing their practice, but couldn't report their thoughts about it. In both of these cases, they were doing a combination of body awareness and noting ---- but were not noting whole  categories of mind objects (emotions and thoughts).

This is why I think working with a teacher helps. We all have blind spots. In both of those cases, it was clear that they need to do dedicated noting of sensations for a period of their sits. Similarly the other person needed to do dedicated noting of "practice thoughts" during their sits. My sense is that body scanning was not going to be the answer for them. But who knows?

I think the biggest factor for Equanimity and SE is actually getting good at noticing urges (pre-emotions) and thoughts-as-thoughts, especially thoughts about practice.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/14719066))

Practices that say "focus on bare sensations" are very good way to build a foundation for practice, but at some point the meditator also has to pay attention to how urges (of attraction, aversion, and indifference), feelings/emotions (like anger, frustration, confusion, ambition, etc.) and thoughts (practice thoughts, planning thoughts, comparing thoughts, etc.) show up within the mind.  It involves allowing sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts to occur without manipulation, sort of like seeing them as "mind objects" that automatically appear in the space of the mind. And it also involves fully experiencing them, so we get the full impact of the experience. What is interesting is just clarity and intimacy (and time) is enough for the mind's natural intelligence to drop unhelpful habits. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17808044))

In time, you realize that the purpose of mind is to detect greed, aversion, and ignorance... but we identify too much with the sensations, urges, emotions, and habitual thoughts so it's difficult to detect those things. When we develop the ability to be mindful of sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts AS THE DISCRETE sensations, urges, emotions, and habitual thoughts THAT THEY ACTUALLY ARE -- then the knots loosen and we get insights into how all of these little harmless flashes of experience can create greed, aversion, and ignorance and huge amounts of suffering. Equanimity comes from being clear about what is being experience and not becoming beguiled by aversion, greed, or ignorance. It's hard to describe what it different Paths and awakening feels like, but "greater awareness and equanimity" is pretty close. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8903965))

## Dissolution, Fear, Misery, Disgust, Desire for Deliverance.

Here's what you need to keep in mind: in the dark night, dissolution, fear, misery, disgust, a desire for deliverance, and a freak out mind are all likely to occur ---- as mind states. You are basically being shown a movie of all of your hang ups, your shadow, your history. It's not because you are bad or flawed or unworthy. It's because your mind really does want to digest this old material and move beyond it. There is no way to move through things like trauma or PTSD or Dark Night without going through some difficult mind states. It's simply the nature of healing.

There can be a lot of guilt and shame that also arises when we face our old material, shadow self, and past history. Again, this is not because you are bad or flawed or unworthy. It is because the mind wants to protect itself and avoid stuff until it can move through it.

The nature of mind is such that it wants to be safe AND it wants to heal. Healing involves going into those yucky sensations, awkward emotions, and oppressive thoughts with mindfulness, appreciation, friendliness, caring, and acceptance. When you go through these mind-states with awareness you realize that they are old baggage, not relevant, weather that is here now and gone later, not the same as the Self, transitory. You also can connect to the witnessing/aware mind that SEES all of this. This is what develop the more adult and sane mind that is resilient.

A mature, sane, and adult mind can experience fear, misery, disgust, desire for deliverance, and momentary freak out and say "oh, look at all these fears, look at all this misery, look at all this disgust, look at all these desires for deliverance, look at the mind momentarily freaking out." Ironically, it really is that simple. Of course, when we identify with the mind we tend to think/feel "I AM afraid, I AM miserable, I AM disgusted, I AM desiring for deliverance, I AM freaking out."

There really is no one on earth that can "teach" you to switch from one to the other. In the end, we need to GRADUALLY let ourselves be exposed to these difficult mind states and let them happen and notice how the come and go.

A last point: as developing humans, we can become very paranoid about these difficult mind states because we don't see the good in them. Why on earth should we sit on the cushion and go through all of this? What does it get us?

All these difficult mind states will also have a piece of wisdom connected to it, sort of hidden within the noise. There is a >positive intention< that is within each state. Fear just really wants to keep us safe. Misery really wants the world to be more fair and just. Disgust really wants us to make better choices and care for ourselves. Desire for Deliverance really wants us to work carefully toward improving. And Reobservation really wants to give us a guided tour of all of our silly trigger thoughts/feelings so that we see that freaking out isn't helpful. So on one level, meditation is giving you a personally guided tour of all of the nonsense in our mind so that we can re-connect, re-interpret, re-evaluate the thoughts and feelings we have toward ourself and the world.

This is also why mediation improves psychology and morality --- we have to go through this character growth in order to be able to rest in Equanimity as a stable state. If we don't grow and develop, then any little Dark Night blip of discomfort will throw us around. When Equanimity is mature, aspects of the dark night pop up as little purifications and we can even go through a Reobservation-like mind state without being freaked out.

The normal human progress for developing resiliency is:

(1) First we are only stable when the body and mind is stable,

(2) Then we can be stable when the body is freaking out but the mind stays clear,

(3) Finally we are so grounded in the Self that we can be stable when the body and mind is freaking out

It really is amazing what is possible... but we have to gradually develop these skills. While meditation on the battlefield is theoretically possible, we can't start a meditation practice there. We would just traumatize and re-traumatize our self. We have to gradually develop calmness in the face of challenges. And these challenges should be at an appropriate dose, so that we can develop resiliency over time.

You have to learn your weaknesses and take them into account. Are you someone that rushes foolishly into too much intensity? Are you someone that represses and avoids direct experience? Are you someone that fantasizes that suffering is heroic and a good thing? Are you someone that fantasizes that suffering means you are a failure and will never be any good? We all have tendencies toward greedy, aversive, or delusion modes of relating to our inner experiences... it's important to learn the ways we cling, avoid, and are indifferent to our experience. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/10949944))

## Stuff bubbling up.

Both modern psychology and traditional Buddhism talks about stuff "bubbling up" when you meditate. Basically, we seem to have a natural instinct to control/contain the messy aspects of our mind by kind of putting them aside and not thinking about them. When we relax the mind through meditation, these incomplete thoughts and feelings --- even "vile and depressive" thoughts and feelings --- will bubble up into consciousness.

The interesting thing is while this seems like it will open up an endless flow of more suffering... actually we only have about ten or twenty thought patterns that give us problems. There are a lot of variations to those patterns, but our mental problems are really pretty basic, childish in a way, and not very complex once you see the pattern. We basically make odd assumptions about ourselves and life and then create odd stories that we completely believe, without question.

Whether it is worth it or not is ultimately a choice, but progress in meditation necessarily means sitting with and experiencing all the dark aspects of our minds. Anger, greed, fear, lust, ambition, and pride is going to come up. Depressive thoughts like "I'm flawed", "I'm not safe", "I'm not worthy of love", "I'm a failure", "I didn't reach my potential" are going to come up -- this is the normal human mind.

The only way you will make progress is if you can learn to accept and be interested in all the vile and depressive stuff that comes up. Basically becoming a detective, your own psychologist, and getting very interested in how the mind works. What is true and untrue about the vile and depressive stories you tell yourself? How can you accept and live with your past, yet see every day as blank slate?

The problem with pure "mindfulness" practices is they tend to open up the mind, but they don't really give people any tools for working with the dark stuff. Normally that's fine, because most of the time we can just explore our mind and a kind of natural intelligence leads us along... but if we are hitting roadblocks, then we need the help of a professional psychologist and/or meditation teacher to help us see that these roadblocks are very interesting! and worthy of investigation. Usually the roadblocks have some "message" within them that we are failing to see -- and that's why we keep hitting the roadblock. It is as if the mind is saying: pay attention to this first.

Hidden in almost every problem is some piece of wisdom that is being overlooked. Meditation involves a lot of just sitting and exploring all the variations of greed, aversion, and ignorance. The wisdom is usually in the form "I can't believe I was thinking about X in that way! I thought X meant I had this problem, but actually X was pointing me toward the solution. I just wasn't seeing it."

And it's funny, most of the time the solution is to just let things be. A lot of the time, we're just making things into a bigger problem than they actually are. Sometimes the problem is in the past, which we can't change. Sometimes the problem is in the future, which we can't know. When we're sitting in normal meditation practice, we're safe and have nothing else to do... so any so-called "problem" that comes up is just the part of our mind that seems to make problems in order to feel busy and protected. That's the part of the mind that we can learn to calm down, simply by letting it have problems. We don't need to do anything, except notice them and welcome them and not push them away. Just let it bubble up. Simple. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7436016))

## Reobservation.

Center and background changes as you look. So if you look out the window and see a tree, the center of attention is the tree and everything else is context. And if you look at the window pane, everything else becomes context. But if you ask yourself "what is it that is seeing the tree?", you'll probably notice that your vision goes wide and your eyes sort of glaze over a little as you start thinking of "yourself". Now the entire visual field is background and your sense of being a self is in the center of attention. So you never quite get to "look at" the background, it's always in the background... except sometimes you can catch it by "going wide" and "inclusive". So if you look at the tree the eyes focus, then ask "what is seeing the tree?" the vision widens and eyes glaze, and then say to yourself, the entire field of perception is mind and I am the same thing as mind  --- then sometimes you vision goes wide but there is also sharpness or present-ness. It has a sense of space and depth.

This works in noting practice by getting a sense that we often focus on noting things in the center of attention... which is very interesting for a while, but then it begs the question: what is the observer of all of this? What am I? And so we'll start noting the aspects of what seems to be the sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts of being an observer.

But our sense of self starts falling apart when we put it under observation -- because suddenly we're exposing all the sensations, urges, thoughts, and emotions that we use to orient our self in this world. All of a sudden we realize, maybe unconsciously, if I'm looking at the center, then I'm not the center am I?, where am I?, and a primal kind of panic happens.

During Reobservation, all of our insecurities come out because the normal way of being a self, which we try to protect by kinda ignoring it or overlooking it, is now being exposed as not really the self. We think the self is the center of experience, but those aspects of experience that make us feel in the center are now being seen ---- so where are we? What is the I? Time to panic!

Initially the mind can't handle this exposure, this lack of center/solidity --- so we sort of freak out, but that happens by having all of our psychological defense mechanisms being triggered. In other words, the mind protects itself by doing it's usual kinds of freak-outs. That's why Reobservation is so provocative. That's also why Reobservation is so specific to a person. Each person has there kind of classic primal feelings of freaking out --- probably created back when were a baby and we felt our parents go away --- and each person has its own psychological patterns of freaking out --- defense mechanism created as children and teenagers as we learned to "protect our identity/self".

And that's why Reobservation is shitty, but one of the best teachers out there. We simply have to watch ourselves squirm, meanwhile realizing that all we're doing is sitting down in a safe place and watching our mind freaking out.

The things that are important to note in Reobservation are the things that tend to convey "I am having a hard time during this stage known as Reobservation and I want to either get through it quickly or quit practicing". What sorts of things in our experience make Reobservation known as Reobservation?

Remember that the dark night stages are not simply called dissolution, fear, misery, disgust, desire for deliverance, Reobservation --- but rather "knowledge of dissolution" "knowledge of fear" etc. In other words, to really "get" a stage you need to do more than simply experience it, you need to have the knowledge of it, the knowing of how these stages are created by mind. You need get "meta" and understand both objective experience and how the subjective experience is created. So the urges, emotions, and thoughts are almost more important than the sensations after you have developed a foundation of mindfulness. Many people stay on just sensations, so they remain trapped by urges, emotions, and thoughts. The things we tend to overlook are the things "on the periphery" or "in the background" or "on this side" -- because those are the things that we identify with as self, even though they are actually just sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts that are not (normally) in the center of attention. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17639506))

Reobservation usually passes with a bit of crying and deep acceptance of the reality of how flawed we are --- but it doesn't need to stop progress. Reobservation is a wonderful teacher that humbles us and keeps us honest. For better or worse, it's like holding a mirror up to our self and really getting a good look. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17504810))

## The Challenge of Dark Night.

A big part of the challenge of the dark night stages is that you can't make it into what it isn't. In other words, it tends to be moody, subtle, vague, sloppy, uncontrolled... and if you try to make it bright, obviously, distinct, precise, and under control then you'll just suffer. There is a lot to "see" in the dark night (how insidious reactive patterns are, yet how thin and ghost like they are, so it is a big problem or actually a tiny problem?) but you have to look at it directly and not assume something is wrong or needs to be a different way. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/13395630))

## Allow yourself to experience pleasure if it arises when in DN.

It is important for a dark night yogi to allow him/herself to experience pleasure when it arises. Rather than thinking "concentration" think "centering yourself". When pleasure arises, put yourself in the center of it. Delight in it. Enjoy it. Know that Buddha highly recommended this kind of karma-free delight. Don't worry about vipassana when pleasure arises --- this will feel wrong to a dark night yogi, but this is actually why someone is a dark night yogi. When delight arises, enjoy it and wish for all being everywhere to also experience delight in their life. Be like a lightout sending out this joy and delight to everyone.

There will be hard crashes as well. Dark night yogis have guilt complexes, persecution complexes, fears, deep feelings of inadequacy. It's important to remember that you are noticing all of these things in awareness, but you are not these things. These are old habits of mind that are showing themselves to you, so that you can clearly see them. You can clearly see how they are primitive urges that are trying to be helpful, trying to protect you, trying to keep you safe... but they are simply not appropriate anymore. It's time to let them go. Don't force them away, but simply allow them to come and go. Let those primitive states of mind feel your attention, even send them some love and kindness. Be gentle with the shadow side of your psyche, all it really wants is your love and respect.

Sometimes it can be helpful to zoom into whatever feels "bad" or like "ill will" ask, is this greed, aversion, or ignorance/fantasy? That can be an interesting question, although you don't necessarily need an answer every time. Regardless, after you spend some time being curious about it, send that bad feeling some metta or good will.

A dark night yogi kinda secretly wants to have all the bad stuff beaten out of him/her. A dark night yogi often is intimidated by love, healing, and joy. Use this retreat to drop the masochism and build new habits. Be gentle with yourself, but stay disciplined. Be kind to yourself, but keep the practice schedule. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6811263))

There is no way to truly and completely avoid going through some hard stuff in DN. But that said, if you feel like your practice has momentum and aspects of joy, rapture, pleasure, or bliss are coming up in your meditation, Kenneth Folk's main point is that it is absolutely a good and productive thing to center yourself within those nice feelings. You won't be wasting your time. You will be doing the conditioning that helps make the mind slippery and more likely to slip into equanimity and SE. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6811263))

## Late Dark Night.

My favorite meditator quote about Reobservation comes from Tarin, one of the original Dharma Overground participants: “The Dark Night territory - particularly late dark night - has a habit of making me unsure which methods are best to employ in practice. Should I note? Should I use open awareness? Should I pay attention to the wide vibrations? Should I go with the discomfort? Should I observe the questioning? etc. I would feel very dissatisfied with anything I tried. Eventually I realized that the nature of Re-observation to was to have a cow with anything and everything and when I realized this it mattered a whole lot less what I did since I knew I would have no way of knowing if it was effective practice or not! regardless, my recommendation would be to note or observe frustration, pain, doubt, boredom, distraction, gaming, predicting, expecting, etc when and where they arise and make sure - I mean really make fucking sure - that if you're killing yourself trying to meditate that you note that too.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/13395630))

## Notice how the mind works.

No one completely dis-identifies from mind, it sort of comes and goes in waves where you are your thoughts and then you are observing your thoughts. The goal is not to find some third place to camp out and observe everything, but rather notice how the mind works. Some people find it useful to simply notice that regardless of the experience, the framework of observation, experience is simply "known". ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11988323)) 

## Clinging, Releasing, Non-tangibility of Thoughts.

Unfortunately the only way we learn to see our clinging is by buying into the drama and then seeing our mistake. Same thing with releasing, the only way we learn to allow impermanence is to resist/fight it and then see our mistake. There is nothing better at showing us the non-tangibility of our thoughts than catastrophizing, believing it, freaking out, and then realizing what we've been doing, and hopefully finding the cosmic humor in it too. It helps to laugh at ourself! ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7112136)) 

## After a certain point in meditation, it really does become about dropping psychological defense mechanisms and purification.

Basically, after a certain point in meditation, it really does become about dropping defense mechanisms (in the psychological sense) and purification. A lot of our old ways of thinking/coping become blatantly obvious and seen as childish, and in its place is not a new stability, but rather an ability to navigate in a world of ambiguity. If folks are really comfortable in their life, then short meditations as a sort of adult "quiet time" is probably fine... but if you increase the dose with meditation retreats or serious daily practice, then things \_will\_ change.   
  
One thing that seems clear to me in retrospect is so much of our habits and behaviors are kind of wired into our body. As a result, when we start turning over rocks in our psyche, it is a full mind-body process and it feels a bit like a slow-speed drug detox.   
  
Now that said, if you go through it all, then it is very easy to say "good riddance" to all those defense mechanisms and it is very easy to prefer the results of meditation... but it is a lot like saying I just spend 7 years going to the gym every day and my body is stronger and healthier --- well it should be with all that effort!   
  
So yes, anything more than short recreational meditation should come with a warning label. It can be disruptive and difficult. It definitely makes you both more sensitive and resilient, but you have to go through phases where it is quite difficult -- old stable perspectives are falling apart and no new comforting perspectives take their place, except for a very adult (and paradoxical) sense that "meditation gives you stability by becoming acquainted with instability".   
  
Just a few other cautions:  
  
\* People have lots of horror stories and glamour stories of what meditation does (you find no self, you find true self, you have no agency, you're on autopilot, you are empowered) -- my experience is while there are states that suggest these have an element of truth, in the end there is an appreciation that these are simply states that people cling to. It's much more accurate to say everything becomes an honest "middle path" between extremes states of self and no self, intention and no agency... etc. etc.   
  
\* People have a lot of ideas about what philosophies someone who has gone through the whole deal would have (vegan, omnivoire, pacifist, warrior, meek, wrathful, etc. etc.) -- my experience is while all of these are valid views in their own way, again in the end there is a lot more appreciation for both their true and falseness and living life becomes -- rather that living out a particular philosophy -- much more of navigating life on a case by case, moment by moment basis. Again, very middle path when it comes to views.  
  
\* There are many people (myself included) who started meditation in part as a way to get away from the shadow part of their psyche --- these people often have an idealized version of what meditation is and does... and it can be a harsh wake-up call when meditation gives them a much more complex insights and results.  
  
\* Ultimately, meditation will point out our very very very basic sense of "woundedness and lack" and shine a big spotlight on it. It will never heal that wound or fill that lack, but rather point out how we were confused in the first place about being wounded and lacking. It's a very strange process to describe, but by going deep into how we relate to the world as self and object, interior and exterior, we eventually see that there is a very basic coping mechanism of trying to put the world "over there" so it can't really hurt us, and me "over here" so I'm in control. The end result is the boundaries become much more porous and flip-floppy and there is a greater clarity and intimacy with what is experienced. It is a bit like waking up from a dream, waking up to the obvious.  
  
To wrap it up, I was personally compelled to really do the work and "get" what this was all about. It was basically something that haunted me my whole life. I don't push meditation on my wife, family, or friends. It's not essential for a pretty good life, especially if the person is trying to be a good person and create a good society for everyone. That said, yes there is something deep in this stuff that people who do not do the practice will miss out on, they will not have the same deep sense of "knowing oneself" as a meditator. But maybe that's no big deal. My hunch is that when people reach their developmental limit and feel the stagnation, then they are probably ready for it and will hunger for a meditation practice. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6718376))

### Becoming absorbed.

Daniel Ingram’s warning against "solidifying jhanas" is more for people who come up through a concentration based practice, not for people who have been practicing noting/vipassana. Vipassana people have the opposite problem, they are so used to investigating, probing, inspecting, doing, doing, doing... that they don't ease up. Becoming absorbed (which means becoming very intimate with your experience) is about the best thing that can happen for a post A&P and pre-SE yogi. Kenneth Folk’s article speaks to it, see the section "[How does a yogi know whether to practice samatha or vipassana?](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/dharma-wiki/-/wiki/Main/Jhana+and+Ñana+/en)" ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8196055))

## On Vibrations.

Vibrations can be interesting gateways... and great training tools. Notice how you have to pay attention to them with a gentle attention otherwise they get "squashed" by too much effort. Kenneth Folk talked about how much effort it takes: it is like you are standing in the ocean, waist deep in the water, and there is a ping pong ball floating by you. It is bobbing up and down gently in the ripples. And your job is to put your finger on the ball and let it still float up and down, but with your finger never losing contact. So you must be very sensitive and very very gentle. One thing to notice about vibrations is how the mind tends to notice the strong part of vibrations, but pays less attention to the "gaps" in between. Without using too much effort, also be curious about the gaps. What to gaps feel like? Is there a sensation there? A sound, perhaps?  Buzzy vibrations in the head can be interesting, too. Those sensations are very close to where we feel "I am" in the head... so sometimes "I am" starts vibrating too.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/13519742))

Regarding annoying vibrations, they can sometimes be seen as "they are over there and I am over here being bothered by them". Even saying "I'm going to be Equanimeous to them" sets up this distancing. My best advice is actually to feel like you are sticking your face into the middle of them and ideally immerse and swim in them. To do that, you'll need to get interested in all of the subtlety and waves and interference patterns and your mind will become very concentrated. Seems like your mind is trying to help you go deeper! ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6930113))

## My Post A&P / Pre-SE Cheat Sheet.

Here are my notes from when I was at that a post-A&P / Pre-SE stage of practice. My best advice is to make your own cheat sheet that fits on one page and post it where you sit. Write it in your own words, so that it really feels like the voice in your head is reminding you how to practice well.

(1) Motivation for Daily Practice. Insight can’t be forced, but it can be nurtured and given the opportunity to arise.

(2) Right View of the Path. Experiencing the sensation of the moment is the only experience that qualifies as meditation. Thoughts are linked moments of the sensations of thinking. Stay at the level of bare sensations. Time is a sensation.

(3) Right Effort on the Path. Clearly and strongly renouncing speculation and committing to simply attending to the expression of this very moment is the right effort in the beginning. Gently returning again and again to the moment is the right effort in the middle. Letting the moment reveal itself is the right effort for the mature part of the path. Insight is always a surprise and cannot be forced, but it is cultivated by returning to attending to this moment.

(4)  Noting

\* If things look solid: note!

\* If you are lost in thought: note!

\* If you are feeling ungrounded: note!

\* If it all feels useless: note those sensations, too!

Noting is better than floundering.

“Don’t need your wants.”

“If you are looking for a solution, you aren’t seeing the problem.”

“Less is more.”

(5) Perceiving Vibrations

\* If you are able to perceive vibrations of your object: do so as completely and consistently as possible.

\* If you are feeling that you can perceive vibrations of not only your object but also other things simultaneously: do so.

\* If you can perceive vibrations of not only your object but broad things like space, consciousness, thought, memory, intention, investigation, effort, suffering and the like: do so.

\* If at any point you find that you can't perform at the level you were functioning at, drop back down the hierarchy as far as you need to, perhaps back to noting.

(6) Application to Stages

\* When you enter the second vipassana jhana, aka the Arising and Passing Away (A&P), most people can drop the noting, as it is just too slow.

\* After this stage fades, many will need to go back to noting until they stabilize, as Dissolution can cause regression as we get used to its wider, more out of phase field.

\* When the Dark Night arises, many will need to note at points to keep from getting lost in their stuff. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/14179548))

## Transition to Equanimity.

Equanimity is something that can easily be accessed during home practice, it isn't some mythical high state that is only accessed on retreat. EQ happens when we get out of our own way, let things be as they are, stay curious, and apply the lessons we learned about all the ways we needlessly make things more difficult. So, consistent daily practice with no pressure to get anywhere or accomplish anything. If it sucks, enjoy the sucking. If it is great, enjoy the greatness. Both states are known as they are. Don't try to fix anything on the cushion, there is plenty of time to try to figure things out later. Just sit and let things be exactly as they are.  Sit for your normal productive length of time. For some people it's 45 minutes, while for others it's closer to 60 minutes. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11988323))

## Real & False Equanimity.

Equanimity should have a flavor of kindness, ease, and space. False equanimity is often actually aversion and indifference. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/13248260))  

## Equanimity, aversion, greed and ignorance.

Equanimity comes from being clear about what is being experience and not becoming beguiled by aversion, greed, or ignorance. It's hard to describe what it different Paths and awakening feels like, but "greater awareness and equanimity" is pretty close.   
  
… It is important that aversive types learn to dial back the effort and add a lot more self-respect, allowing, and trust into their practice. You need to see that there is an aware part of your mind that can realize how hard you are making it for yourself and realizing "I really exhausted my body, maybe there is an easier way?"   
  
Noticing how "awareness" or "mindfulness" really require no effort. Our mind creates awareness like our skin creates the moisture that is always leaking out of our pores. Experiment letting your mind naturally explore and loosen knots, rather that forcing it. I can GUARANTEE you that all the same releases and insights can happen with much less effort. But you have to trust the natural intelligence of your mind.  
  
Once I really understood that mindfulness was, in a way, smarter that "me", I went on a 14 day retreat and had THE BEST time of my life. It was so wonderful. The insights happened. I enjoyed the retreat. I slept well. And I came back home knowing that I can't really lie to my mind. It knows when I'm using too little or too much effort. I just need to trust that intuition and keep becoming good a more and more subtle balancing of mind. And for me, that meant dropping my habit of using too much aversion and effort.  
  
In time, you realize that the purpose of mind is to detect greed, aversion, and ignorance... but we identify too much with the sensations, urges, emotions, and habitual thoughts so it's difficult to detect those things. When we develop the ability to be mindful of sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts AS THE DISCRETE sensations, urges, emotions, and habitual thoughts THAT THEY ACTUALLY ARE --  then the knots loosen and we get insights into how all of these little harmless flashes of experience can create greed, aversion, and ignorance and huge amounts of suffering. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8903965))

## Balance as a metaphor for Equanimity.

I like to use "balance" as a metaphor for EQ...  There really isn't such a thing as passive balance or static balance or "just completely letting go" , rather its a ongoing state of very gentle and subtle yet active adjustments. Balance looks easy, but it requires skill --  you can imagine someone learning to land a plane or ride a bike and the problems beginners have with  being stiff and ridgid and overcorrection, basically you wreck the plane/bike if your adjustments aren't developed enough.  
  
Regarding posture, much of the quality of mind relates to how we hold the body. In EQ, it can really help to think of balancing the body on the spine: naturally stacking the vertebra so that the body rests on itself like a stack of poker chips --- this too is a skill that is developed over time, but eventually sitting can be a very low-effort thing. That said, perfect posture is not a requirement for SE. Again, the ego tends to think that everythign needs to be perfect, but really everything needs to be balanced.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8903965))

## Low Equanimity.

The classic mistake people make at this stage is they stop practicing because everything seems fine, no dukkha, nothing much to work on... The correct approach is to keep \_gently\_ practicing every day, and notice how things like space, ease, non-clinging, acceptance, openness, etc. are still experiences which can be noted. In other words, notice all the aspects of equanimity as a mind state too. There are still many aspects of mind to be curious about in these more simple states. It's easy to remember to investigate weird energies and jolts and pressures... but also make sure you continue to sit and use a very gentle effort to investigate normalness, ease, and even the minor sense of confusion. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/13248260))

## When in Equanimity…

Active investigation is what keeps us sitting and moving through the ñanas... but there is a time when it needs to be mostly dropped, leaving the natural curiosity of the mind to take over. When solidly in EQ, it's time to rely on the natural awareness and curiosity of the mind. Notice how the mind is naturally aware and awareness itself doesn't require any effort. Notice how the mind has its own curious nature, and will move from object to object on its own. Participate in this process (go where the mind goes) and don't try to force the mind to go somewhere in particular. The gentle nudges at this stage are more along the lines of not allowing very subtle resistance to be >fully< experienced. Usually the resistance takes the form of thoughts about practice. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/13082932))

... In EQ it can be very helpful to very gently inquire: "who/what is experiencing all of this?". Not looking for a verbal answer, but rather to see what blindspots/resistances are left when we're in a state with almost no blindspots/resistances. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11701133))   
  
... If dull, sit up a little straighter, breathe with more intention, brighten your outlook. If agitatated, frustrated, having difficulties... then relax by softening the posture, softening the breath (try sighing a little, ahh...), and remind yourself this is a long term practice so no need to force some accomplishment in a particular sit.  
  
Be sure your "notes" include all the "lack of motivation" "spinning" "worries" "planning" "not really trying" "just sitting" etc.  All of those experience are states that you can recognize. They aren't "you", they appear in you.  
  
Even boredom and lack of motivation can be turned into an investigation. What \_is\_ lack-of-motivation? What are the sensations that make it up? What are the feelings of the emotions that make it recognizable as lack-of-motivation? What are the typical patterns of thoughts that go with it? Get curious about boredom and lack of motivation.  
  
If you want to try an "inquiry" type practice, when things are flat and nothing much is happening (usually 20-30 minutes into a sit), form the intention and ask the question "Resistance?" Ask it like you are asking the universe to show you where there might be any remaining resistance in your experience. Then just sit and let the answer come. It will come as a feeling or a flash of an image or a piece of a thought. Just experience that and feel it. Let it arise, linger, and pass. When things are flat again, you can ask "Resistance?" again. Only do this three to five times in a sit. Don't turn it into a meaningless mantra. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5878174))

## EQ, the floating peanut & mindstream of thoughts.

The mindfulness "touch" you need is very very light. My favorite metaphor (from Kenneth folk) is that you are standing in the ocean in waist deep water. A peanut is floating in front of you, going up and down in gentle waves. You job is to put a finger on the peanut as it floats up and down, but not lose contact and without pushing it deeper into the water. So enjoy and be curious about eq, stay present/participating with what arises with a light touch. For me, I also found that going into the "mindstream of thoughts" was useful. And a lot of people notice mental "vibrations" (almost like feeling the thump of thoughts) and it can be helpful to wonder what is the gaps between vibrations. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17417404))

## The real trick in Equanimity.

The real trick in EQ is first getting good at noticing sensations as sensations, urges as urges (pre-emotions), emotions as emotions, and thoughts -- especially thoughts about practice -- as thoughts. And then radically let them be exactly as they are without avoidance or manipulation. Neither clinging to, nor avoiding. But the tendency is to always have thoughts "about it". Once you can watch your self have thoughts... then you are very close. When you can notice thoughts about the self or thoughts about thinking... then you are right on the doorstep. When you can listen to thoughts and they becomes sounds that seem to hit the mind like little pulses... then you are stepping through the door. And when you are sitting in meditation, meditating on the mindstream, and you step through the door, you will fall into a hole, and then you land in the place you are already sitting.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/14719066)) 

## Equanimity isn't just the clear, calm, open 'state'.

 Another bit of advice for equanimity... States and stages are fine to notice, but recognize that retreats creates the "container" of equanimity. You become better able to be with all of THIS because it is all within mind, all within awareness, not in a particularily special way, but in a very very natural way...   
  
If things are going fine as they are, you are allowed to enjoy the lived experience of being present. Enjoy being "here". If there are thoughts that "I need to practice harder" that's a mind movement. If there are thoughts that "I'm almost there" that's a mind movement. If there is a thought "I'm dropping out of equanimity, I'm getting farther away" that's a mind movement, too. Connect with your lived experience whatever it is. Try to live in this present and immediate way all retreat.  
  
As a little trick: physical sensations are always immediate. You can rely on feeling physical sensations as a refuge, a way to reconnect with  immediate experience.  
  
When you are "here", it is a very simple state. Nothing really breaks it. Nothing really can be added to it. It IS.  
  
Sometimes this is-ness is kind of concentration state inducing and you'll want to close your eyes. That's fine, you can go deep into inner awareness. That is still "here".   
  
Sometimes this is-ness is so immediate that thoughts become nearly silent or like a trickle, and you wonder "am I even practicing?". That's still being here.  
  
Sometimes this is-ness evoke a splash of creative thinking and you wonder "should I try to capture all these ideas or should I try to stop all this thinking?". Basically, don't worry about it. Let the mind do what it does. Limit note taking to a few words or a few sentences, but let thoughts happen. Trust that if it is a good thought, it will come back after retreat.  
  
(I've been seduced many times into creative writing for 30 minutes on retreat when 3 minutes was more than enough. Basically, my mind was bored/creative and was kind of trying to avoid being present.)  
  
Sometimes there will be a storm of worries and concerns and feeling like everything is a catastrophe. Don't worry. That's your friend reobservation. Now is a perfect time to say "oh, look at this mind worry and freak out. I'm going to study how a mind freaks out."  
  
Sometimes you need to move the body, walking meditation, stretching, etc.  -- do so, do it mindfully and experience what it is like to be right "here" in a body.   
  
Finally make sure you sit each evening until you are really ready to go to sleep (like head-nodding, etc.) Sit until you head-nod three times, then mindfully get into bed. Be "here" in bed until the body disappears as you go to sleep. Be "here" in mind as your mind goes to sleep and intend to notice your frist experience when waking finally happens. Let yourself sleep how ever you sleep, dream however you dream, don't worry about that, sleep will do it's own thing on a retreat, listen to your body needs for sleep, maybe it needs more, maybe it needs less.  
  
Equanimity isn't just the clear, calm, open "state". Mature EQ seems to seep into any mind state. It is an objective and intimate knowing of what is "here".  
  
Once you are here, you don't need to "do" anything besides dwell in this simple pleasure that arises from seclusion. So simple, so complete. Nothing to be added. Nothing to take away. Any resistance or ill will is so obvious and so irrelevant, the mind just trying to find a problem, but you know that it's just a habitual movement of mind, so including that mindstream of worries in this experience of being here.  
  
Poor mind, so troubled for all these years. It wants to worry because it just wants to protect us. That's fine mind, do your thing. I won't repress you, but I won't indulge you either...   
  
So thoughts come and go, emotions come and go, urges come and go, body sensations come and go... all within this space of knowing. Sometimes this knowing is on the exterior world, sometimes on the physical body, sometimes on the inner space of mind... all of this is known. And this knowing is the essence of mind nature. No extra effort or attention is needed. You can relax and let the mind know. Let the mind know. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5693956))

## The transition from Low-EQ to High-EQ.

The transition from low-EQ to high-EQ is all about going the step beyond "just this" and getting gently curious -- very very very gently curious -- about "what notices just this?" In other words, after clinging and aversion have slacked and EQ dominates, it's time to get curious about the knowing mind itself. What knows "just this?" What is mind? This is something that is before language so the question isn't answered with words, but rather discovered by connecting directly with the mind that knows.

Often there will be states that solidify (clarity, calmness, jhanas, etc.) which are great to dwell in for a while, it's totally good practice to really savor them. These states help condition the mind. But as they fade you can ask, what knew that? And what knows that it is now fading? Hope you keep consistent daily practice going. It's very easy to experience a kind of ‘divine apathy’ during EQ and slack off on practice! ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6000209))

Higher levels (ñanas) are not really more difficult, but they are more easily thwarted by greed, aversion, and fantasy. If you are greedy for spiritual experiences, adverse to what is happening, and fantasizing about something different --- then progress rarely happens. Seems like at this point you need to get used to being in deeper, more subtle equanimity. Or you could say, you need to use this equanimity to notice subtle habits of greed, aversion, and fantasy. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/12423320)) 

## Pre-SE depression.

I am definitely not saying "oh, just ignore your depression and keep practicing". Actually, more of the reverse. A lot of time depression/dukka nanas is tangled up with unconscious identification/pride...   
  
Being far away from SE oriented practice is probably the best place to be. The fantasy gone and left with where you really are and what your life is really like. The most important thing to ask your self is what do you really want from practice? Not quoting anybody about what practice will do, but what truly is your own motivation for practice?  
  
Sometimes the best thing about practice is just that moment in time where you can sit with yourself, just as you are, and BE. No method, no progress, no change. Just a moment of rest from being somebody to just being...  
  
Sometimes the best thing about practice is the intellectual curiousity that comes from being able to investigate our minds, so even the "malfunctioning" is actually interesting and still is an amazing functionality... what actually is this depression, how is it actually made, why do humans fall for it...  
  
Sometimes it's the mini releases that come from putting attention on resistance, how things start creaking and popping and releasing when you bathe it with awareness...  
  
Sometimes it's the psychological insights into clinging that are so engaging. Ah, this is how I take an idea and a sensation and create a emotional mood, which creates a psychological context that reinforces the mood, a self-referential trap... and here's another way, and another way...  
  
Sometimes it's returing to reading about meditation and getting intellectually interested again... or getting interested in the actual persons who wrote the book, what their lifes were actually like as human beings living in a changing world...  
  
Sometimes it can just be making the connection with that inner wise guide that seems to be behind all of practice... we know there is something in us that is working, even if we have no idea where things are leading or what we need to do next. Sometimes just connecting with that essence/spirit/soul/Self is the heart of why we practice.  
  
And sometimes it >completely unrelated to practice<. There can be aspects of our life that we have been neglecting. Exercise, diet, friendship, entertainment, travel, music, art.  
  
So just a quick word of advice from someone that has gone through pre-SE depression and dukka nanas and disenchantment with practice many times over a couple decades (!) before my practice really got traction --- sometimes it passes in a day or two, but when it feels like something deep is involved, it's usually trying to tell you something.   
  
  
The best practice seems to come from working on whatever "weak link" that presents itself and then follow wherever it leads and then address the next weak link... rather than following methods that assume that progress is going to go in a particular way.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5693956))

## Relax and stay gently curious in High EQ.

Relax and stay gently curious in High EQ and soak in it. When you are saturated with High EQ you'll probably drop into a weak EQ-like state which seems kind of normal. Relax and be gently curious there too. The popping could occur within High EQ, but it's more likely to occur during just a normal EQ-ish like state when nothing much is happening.

Yes, at various times you will be ported into formless jhanas. No big deal. If you use a lot of effort, looking to get a big POP, you might get ported into A&P again and have some fireworks. You might experience weak fruitions from the previous path. All no big deal. But what you are looking for is to lose your striving so that you collapse into a path fruition like falling into a black hole --- not shooting out into space like a rocket. Use less energy and effort. Cut that in half. Cut that in half. Really drop striving and just be there.

Focusing on the feeling of "ending" associated with the out breath can also help. Stay gently curious about the beginning of the next breath. End of breath. Rest. Curious. Ah next breath. End of breath. Rest. Curious, etc.  It can help to remember that NO ONE can predict when a path fruition will occur. It is always a surprise. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6737037))

## While in High EQ, see the weirdness of self.

Notice that it's conventional language to say "I am moving through these last phases". But the gateway and domain of high EQ is seeing the weirdness of being a self... It's fundamentally weird to notice our own mind, right? Our mind being aware that we have a mind, how does that even work? Is the self a mind? Or is everything mind? Where does mind begin and end? Is awareness the same thing as what arises IN awareness? If we are truly an observer, then how can we be aware of observing? What is it that can notice observing? What is it that can be aware of awareness?

The point here is not to find some verbal story you can tell yourself, but rather to look at the experience of EQ and notice how truly weird it is. The clear boundary of mind and not mind, self and other, awareness and experience... it all gets very loose and kinda confusing... and is the mind that is aware of being confused a confused mind, or is it a clear knowing mind that is aware of confusion? ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17417404))

## Solidifying EQ.

Solidifying EQ into a 4th jhana would be much more like zoning out and only noticing a vague "suchness" of things -- but without even noticing that they were doing that. You can see people become overly attached to "Presence" without even realizing that presence is still a known state --- therefore there must be aspects of presence which allow it to be recognized as presence ---- you see what I mean? Some people just loose all traction with experience when they get into EQ.

Remember how there is the fractal aspect of EQ? Imagine if you were in the dissolution fractal of EQ --- it would seem solid but vague and mushy and comforting --- that's another way to talk about the problem of EQ solidifying into 4th jhana. Now that said, if you simply noticed the mushiness and comfort you would instantly be vipassana-ing again. You see how easy it is to not be trapped? So yes, there might be people who get trapped in mushy an comfort and think that's enlightenment and do that for 20 years... but hopefully you can tell that it is very unlikely you will have that problem.

In fact, it's important to understand that the fact that you made a list shows how you are in no danger of being absorbed in a problematic way!!

Kenneth Folk says that the supposed danger of solidifying EQ is unlikely for most western students. And it's more likely that they will neurotically work against themselves by specifically not relaxing and over analyzing instead. Like Kenneth says, most western students can't completely turn off the investigation/analyze aspect of their meditation. They have to be told, reassured, and reassured again: it's okay to groove out and soak in the calming, relaxing, juicy aspects of meditation. It isn't all work, work, work. You are allowed and encouraged to dwell in it. Or as one teacher said, "revel in it".

Sometimes a little metta practice as part of sitting can help. Simply saying these words (or make up your own) and connect with the meaning of calm, ease, safe, etc. In other words, when you say calm, let your body connect with the feeling of calm. When you say ease, let your body connect with the feeling of ease. I found that saying these words to myself, or out loud, without feeling like I was being dishonest or lying, really helped my intention to be friendly with myself and go deeeeeep into EQ.

Really connect with calm, ease, health, rest, wholeness, safety, bravery, wisdom, awakeness, sanity, freedom from suffering, happiness. And then let EQ develop on its own and yes you will learn a thousand different instinctual ways to induce EQ, increase EQ, enjoy EQ. You are 100% allowed to enjoy the fruits of your meditation, enjoy jhana, enjoy just sitting, enjoy watching the mind move. When I reached SE (at home, not on retreat, just doing normal evening sits before bed) I was in a nice delicious state and just watching my thoughts go by. Wow, look at those thoughts... ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8196055))

## Dreamlike state in EQ.

The trick is to let yourself go into the dreamlike state WITH awareness. Be aware of what it is like to drift off. It really is that simple.

A big problem in most teaching is that the beginning practice to develop mindfulness (paying close attention, feeling in control of mindfulness, etc) is applied in mature stages too dogmatically. As a result, way too much manipulation and control can occur. And when we are using too much effort, the mind doesn't dwell in equanimity and fall into nibbana. When we use too much effort, the mind goes back to earlier stages. It can feel like progress, but it's really just a loop.

One way to think about it is like you are a over-active sun that is burning up it's fuel and as less and less effort is used, while staying aware, you suddenly collapse into a black hole. Or another way to think of it is like you need to "drop into" nibbana, not climb up and grab nibbana. Less and less effort is appropriate in late EQ.

It can be useful to notice: awareness doesn't require effort. The mind is already aware. The self-directed manipulation of experience requires effort, but awareness itself (seeing, hearing, feeling) requires no effort.

I had one retreat where I kept going from EQ to mind-blowing A&P to EQ to A&P, but my mind was getting more and more exhausted and my entire mind and body was frazzled after two weeks. I was simply trying waaaay too hard to "get" nibbana. After that retreat, I started working with a mentor and he basically said less vipassana more samadhi. He knew I had solid vipassana skills, but like most westerners, I wasn't loose enough.  He helped me enjoy watching where the mind would go on its own. The mind goes where it goes and awareness is already there. No extra effort needed... Months later, sitting at home, in a daydream/hypnogogic-like state with full awareness (I was aware I was in that state) the mind fell into nibbana.

It's never something you can "do", you never know when it will happen... which is great! That means it's not up to you, which takes a lot of the striving and performance pressure away. So less effort and let yourself get dreamy (it's fine to even fall asleep), but keep sitting through it and notice how awareness is already right there in the experience. Keep the consistent daily practice going and experiment with less and less effort. While you are in EQ you simply get curious about the nature of awareness that is present in all experiences.

Mature EQ is about allowing all experiences to arise as the experience itself, even things like doubt, certainty, confusion, clarity, daydreams, super-attentive mind, wandering mind, no-thought mind, etc. etc. --- which can be counter-intuitive since the early stages of practice are all about using certainty to get rid of doubt, using clarity to get rid of confusion, using super-attentive mind to get rid of daydreams, etc. For this to work, mindfulness needs to be well-developed. Paradoxically, once it is well developed we can stay aware of experience where attention itself isn't strong. Sounds weird, but entirely possible. Almost paradoxical like "lucid dream" - awake dreaming.

It's totally normal and even helpful to allow the mind to go into the first four vipassana jhanas during the road to SE. This means losing the strict clarity of experience and having more of the jhana factors show up (intensity of 1st, pleasure of 2nd, bliss of 3rd, richness of 4th). To have this show up, the mind needs to be a little "loose" and be allowed to go to those jhana sensations. It will naturally at times, but you have to let the mind go there.

It's also totally normal and even helpful to allow the mind to momentarily drop into hard versions of the first four jhanas and even drop into formless realms during the road to SE. This occurs naturally as the mind "searches" for nibbana. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11806974)) 

## Nibbana is in the spaces but the mind doesn't know how to find it.

See if you can notice what comes between the gusts of wind, teeth of the gear, vibrations, third eye flickers, etc. In other words, it is obvious how these things "hit" but what is there in the gap between the "hits"?  Basically nibbana is in the spaces but the mind doesn't know how to find it. Eventually it will grab onto nibbana and that's stream entry.  
  
The other thing you can do is really drench yourself in any stilness or jhana that shows up. It has a way of conditioning the mind. Sometimes people will want to "vipassina-ize" experience too much. The other side of the spectrum is called for now: delicious non-judgmental and non-analytical initimacy with what is occuring. Your mind already is "insightful" enough, that's why you are getting the vibrations, now you need to relax, enjoy, and let your mind let go of its life-long tendency to grab objects and instead let it grab onto nothing/nibbana.  
  
... It really does seem that looking at thoughts is really conducive to Stream Entry -- if someone has developed equanimity. If you can listen to the sound of thoughts and feel how thoughts kind of tap tap tap in the mind... that can be very interesting.  
  
... The main thing is consistent daily practice and treating life like a retreat -- from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to sleep stay aaware and intimate with your lived experience.   
  
Retreat are great, especially for big openings, but interestingly the intensity of the retreat expereince and the pressure to get it done during short --- i.e. less than 100 day -- timeframe... well, let's just say it sometimes makes it hard to just simply enjoy the equanimous pleasure of the equanimity nana. But if you are able to do very simple, low-effort sits at home, it can take you there.  
  
It is entirely possible. Try to feel that in your bones. If you don't think it's possible, then of course it won't happen. But "nothing" is always here, always right within the gap of individual sensations. It doesn't take much to settle down, minimize effort, let reality and awareness just be as it is, dwell in equanimity, let equanimity get loose and dreamy, let the distinction between observer and observed get blurry... and then drop into nibbana. Very simple, just give yourself the opportunity for it to happen by consistent practice.  
  
... Stream Entry doesn't need to happen on retreat. It didn't for me. I was just continuing my practice (actually a few weeks after a retreat) with nothing much changed in my life... Except:  
  
- I absolutely trusted that my mind (not intellect or superego) was leading the way. It just needed my daily practice to see what it needed to see, so to speak.  
  
- My "effort" dropped to almost nothing. How can I "work" or "try" to get get stream entry? It's ridiculous!! I don't know what it is or where it is, how can I try to get there?  
  
- I let go of any state being the answer... and any state being a problem. What does it matter what arises? Equanimity is awareness and acceptance of whatever arises. It's almost too simple.  
  
- I didn't keep trying to "clearly objectify" anything. If I got sleepy or drifty, I let myself get sleepy or drifty. Was I aware of sleepiness or driftiness? Yes. Cool, that's all that is needed. No need to be clear or bright or lazer-minded. Drifty or confused or foggy --- those were all mind states that could be accepted, too.  
  
- The last thing that seemed to change was a willingness to just kind of dwell on the mindstream --- that flow of semi-verbal sounds in the head, that bubbling of proto-emotional urges, that vague sense of somatic being... the subtle flow of things became an object of meditation. Those things really aren't intellectually known and the super-ego doesn't like that stuff because it's bubbly and vague, but it had it's own attraction, hard to explain... except it sounds very similar to the tapping/flickering/vibrating that you mention above!   
  
So basically just trust that it is a matter of time. Relax because "you" don't know how to do it and "you" will never know when it will occur. So really the only thing to do is relax in awareness, enjoy calm states, let go of worries, but keep a gentle and consistent daily practice going ... No big deal, just a matter of time.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5693956))

## Stream Entry is just about making vipassana-like curiosity and jhana-like relaxation a new baseline habit.

Stream entry isn't about doing anything fancy, it's just about making vipassana-like curiosity and jhana-like relaxation into a new baseline habit.... and when you can rest in equanimity without struggle, when you can have thoughts come and go without struggle, when you can be on retreat without struggle, when you basically can practice without practicing, when you know it is completely useless to predict what will happen because no one can predict what happens... then you are in a good place. Hang out there and wonder about the nature of mind that knows all of this. When in doubt, notice what you are experiencing and rest in that experience, even in the experience of "not knowing" itself. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6811263))

## Fading & SE.

Fading as an experience is not detrimental to SE. In fact, allow your experience and self to fade completely if that's what is happening naturally. The fading tends to mean the mind is drifting into light formless jhanas, which is a good sign. Let it happen. You don't need normal clarity of mind for SE. Most likely that's you trying to subtly stay in control of things. You have to let go of control. No one knows how to make SE happen. No one knows when SE will happen. It's beyond your control --- what a relief! If it's beyond control, that means you can really relax. At this point you have to trust the mind itself to lead to SE. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/13082932))

## Just Before SE.

Stream Entry didn’t happen to me on retreat. I was just continuing my practice (actually a few weeks after a retreat) with nothing much changed in my life... Except: (1) I absolutely trusted that my mind (not intellect or superego) was leading the way. It just needed my daily practice to see what it needed to see, so to speak; (2)  My "effort" dropped to almost nothing. How can I "work" or "try" to get stream entry? It's ridiculous!! I don't know what it is or where it is, how can I try to get there?; (3) I let go of any state being the answer... and any state being a problem. What does it matter what arises? Equanimity is awareness and acceptance of whatever arises. It's almost too simple; (4) I didn't keep trying to "clearly objectify" anything. If I got sleepy or drifty, I let myself get sleepy or drifty. Was I aware of sleepiness or driftiness? Yes. Cool, that's all that is needed. No need to be clear or bright or lazer-minded. Drifty or confused or foggy --- those were all mind states that could be accepted, too; (5) The last thing that seemed to change was a willingness to just kind of dwell on the mindstream --- that flow of semi-verbal sounds in the head, that bubbling of proto-emotional urges, that vague sense of somatic being... the subtle flow of things became an object of meditation. Those things really aren't intellectually known and the super-ego doesn't like that stuff because it's bubbly and vague, but it had its own attraction, hard to explain... except it sounds very similar to the tapping/flickering/vibrating (others mention).

So basically just trust that it is a matter of time. Relax because "you" don't know how to do it and "you" will never know when it will occur. So really the only thing to do is relax in awareness, enjoy calm states, let go of worries, but keep a gentle and consistent daily practice going. It can be good to sit without a timer/clock. If it feels good to keep sitting, keep sitting. If it feels like time to get up, sit a few minutes longer then get up. If it feels like you are falling asleep on the cushion, fall asleep on the cushion.  No big deal, just a matter of time. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5693956))

## SE & plane landing.

The road to SE is more like a plane landing, not like a firework. Most people think it's going to be like a firework, with a big explosion of light and sound at the end, but actually towards the end there is a sense of slowly losing speed, gliding, gliding, gliding, a feeling of being close but nothing that you can do... and then almost a surprise when the wheels touch the ground. So letting things slow down, spending more time in just the present moment, having nowhere to go... that's a good approach. Sitting and very gently wondering big things like "what is now? what is body? what is mind?" is enough effort, almost like daydreaming. Letting yourself get pulled into concentration states if the mind wants to go there is good, too. You can trust the mind, it knows where to go. It's taken you this entire way already. It's smarter than you. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/13248260))

## Diagnosing SE.

The best way I can describe it is that the experience of cessation seems to leave behind a bone-deep understanding that a sense of self is not essential for survival. It's an insight that the thing that needed defending 24/7 doesn't need defending. Again, it's non-verbal, so the words are approximations. And upon reflection, you realize that this insight would not have come without doing the practices leading up to it --- so you no longer think rites and rituals are the answer.

Whatever feelings a person has along with it will last for a while and then go away. An insight remains. But here's the deal: stream entry is a big event, but it's also the gateway into other more serious insights. The insight isn't a final insight. There is a lot more terrain to cover which is why motivation for more practice is still there.

Yes, one explanation for people who seem to exhibit the signs of stream entry but who do not report a cessation is that they did experience the cessation, but didn't recognize it. But obviously that's untestable, so who knows?

This is why diagnosing stream entry is less about the event and more about the events leading up to it. If a person has gone through the progress of insight, spent a bunch of time in equanimity, seen formations, and then had an unknowing event --- odds are it is SE/cessation. If the person has gone through the stages, spent a bunch of time in equanimity, had awareness of formations, and then experiences life very differently and feels like something essential has changed, then it has a good chance of being SE even without awareness of a cessation. If someone has other events leading to "the big change" then it probably isn't SE. See what I mean? ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/4116801))

## An A&P event, Formless Realms and Cessation.

Aspects of A&P events can very closely resemble the three main styles of cessation. Many times there will be an A&P event when someone isn't able to rest in EQ with enough centering. It's like the mind knows it wants to go higher but can't, so it grabs onto the closest equivalent. Very very common. That's why people need to know there will probably be 500 A&P events before first path. If most of this is off retreat, then maybe that number is 1000 or 2000 times. Calling an A&P event as Stream Entry is so common, when actually it's just another trip through the A&P ñana. It's very similar to how towards the end of second path there can be a "first-path-like cessation" instead of a "second path fruition" --- this happens all the time. Many times people will call it second instead of a repeat of first. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17356555))

There are many different non-knowing events which seem to outside of time that aren't cessations, including dips into formless realms. And there can be many cessations which aren't path moments. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/13048784))   
  
(Early) in my practice I had an experience (which) years later I now think of it as an A&P event. I was living a very straightforward life, had good ethics, etc. and was doing a lot of awareness training off cushion. I went on a retreat and maintained awareness and at the end (actually on my way home) I experienced a quick build up and then a time gap. And that experience changed my baseline awareness and sense of self.  
  
It seemed very much like stream entry when I first read about it in MCTB although I continued to hold the possibility that it was an A&P Event. This confusion/uncertainty did bother me for a long time.  
  
Anyway, about a couple years later I was working more closely with a teacher, went on a few retreats, and oddly enough at home during normal sitting practice, I had the SE experience. In many ways the time gap was similar, but the lead up and post events were different. There was no build up to SE, except for being in a very high state of EQ and I was meditating on the mindstream (taking thinking itself as a meditation object). This level of equanimity/centering/concentration was unavailable to me two years previously. Also after SE I had basically instant access to (light) jhanas and could clearly tell the difference between J1, J2, J3, J4. Also within a year, I went through another cycle with a lot of jhana and body/mind rewiring which was very obvious and annoying. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/9012366))

## Diagnosing A&P events, Cessations and New Paths.

If the unknowing event was preceded by "energy, bliss, pleasure": A&P event. If the object being observed before the event feels intimate but separate and it feels like you "penetrated" the object: A&P event. If there is a feeling of energetic release after the event: A&P event. If the event was followed by a profound new understanding or wisdom: A&P event.

If the unknowing event was preceded by a period of being clear minded, then getting slightly daydreamy: Cessation. If the "scene" that was being observed had the odd sense of "seeing the self seeing the object", that somehow "you" and "it" were being held in the mind at the same time, and got kinda confusing, and then you found yourself where you already were but somehow time must have passed: Cessation. If it feels like you fell into a hole and landed back inside your body somehow: Cessation. If the unknowing event was followed by a sense of things being plain and normal yet "completely at ease": Cessation.

If it seemed like a cessation, but it doesn't feel that satisfying: Cessation from a previous path. If the Cessation seems to confirm something you already knew, but because you already knew it it's no big deal, but you also feel glad something got done and leave that all behind: possible fruition from a new path, wait and see...  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/15443067))

## Why the need of Cessation as a milestone.

Experience doesn't come with labels. That doesn't mean definitions are meaningless, just that you have to understand the context/system in which the definition is made. In other words, definitions are arbitrary but not necessarily meaningless or capricious.

The short story for me is that experiencing prolonged equanimity during meditation practice, really experiencing the subtlety of mind, experiencing mind moments/formations, experiencing how the flow of pre-verbal thoughts occurs on its own, taking the mindstream as a meditation object, learning to follow the mind rather than control it, and going through cessation... all of that completely changes how you think of your "self" in a way that simply cannot compare to any intellectual thinking about self or not-self.

It is EXTREMELY unlikely to me that someone fails to experience cessation at some point on their way to arahatship, so using cessation as a milestone along the way doesn't have a downside. Plus it delivers as promised: no possibility that the Self experience is "the essence of self", no possibility of thinking anything other than meditation will make a difference (no amount of thinking or rituals will do it), and absolutely no doubt that you have experienced something that is beyond conventional experience and something pointed to by the teachings --- frankly you become amazed that anyone has figured this stuff out and you are thankful to those who have pointed out the path.

The only thing that I disagree with Daniel Ingram is his focus of post-SE cycling and cessations (because not everyone "sees" the ñanas so clearly so this can be missed and not everyone gets repeat cessations) but I do agree that a radical improvement in jhana is a key sign, beginning at A&P when you sit is a key sign, and perhaps most importantly: the road to Second Path soon follows which is marked by strong jhanic overlays on the progress of insight in a way that is new and confusing. It's really unmistakable and unavoidable if someone did experience SE. The way practice continues on to Second Path is probably the surest sign of SE.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/16881024))

## Over-Calling.

Over-Calling is just one aspect of somewhat inevitable narcissism that gets more clearly seen in practice... and then it's kinda embarrassing but excusable because, duh we're competitive mammals that do a lot of social status signaling ... I think over-calling is somewhat fine if there is also doubt and ongoing practice. It's is totally normal. But I get creeped out when people have a moment of not-knowing and are sure they are first path -- they really haven't thought critically about all the criteria for truly having mature knowledge of the ñanas and for first path. And it's scary how quickly they start trying to \_teach\_ getting to first path! I also get creeped out if someone is claiming a later path and doesn't think they have had cessations. By 3rd path, someone should have had 1000s of small cessations. Could there be outliers? Sure. But it's sort of like claiming to have climbed Everest and saying "you know, I actually found there to be plenty of oxygen, but I'm sure it was Everest because the view is exactly how everyone described" --- well, maybe you weren't really on the right mountain, that seems more likely. I really appreciate people that hold high standards even in the midst of a community of people that are apparently "making more progress". It's important not to lie to oneself and keep working on what still creates reactions and areas of the psyche that are still opaque. That's where any value is derived. Paths mean almost nothing (and are probably over-calling) without being built on a foundation of consistent daily practice. As it obvious, even talking in terms of path can be dangerous because there is always the hidden demon of spiritual pride and all the culty pathologies that pride can create. But I'm grateful for the honest discussion of paths in MCTB, it made a big difference in my life. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17356555))

## Before and After SE.

Before a cessation event there tends to be some fairly significant purification, months or sometimes years, either true dark night or a more vipassana jhana version where there is more concentration, less overt psychological material, but still a lot of deep resistances to sitting going away in an almost physical-release way. The person has to feel "wrung out" in a way that isn't traumatic (reliving old trauma can mimic dark night, but the transit through the dark night also includes a lot of healing of those old trauma and old outdated views of self and the world because they are seen very clearly and "digested"). Eventually this transitions into a period reduced practice and regaining perspective of what is important in life. Then if gentle, consistent practice continues, it will transition into a period of profound equanimity (usually weeks/months), where multi-hour sits become realistic and effortless, practice is automatic and deep, where all thoughts of progress just really don't matter anymore, and some profound acceptance of being a human while also appreciating the depths of meditation.

Some of the biggest signs post SE is an ability to access the first four jhanas without much effort... and within 6 months the body goes through some very dramatic re-wiring, so to speak, that involves a lot of body and mind aches, discomfort, etc as well as the insight cycles begin again in a very confusing way because the experience of meditation is now colored strongly by the vipassana jhanas.

Years before, I had an A&P that mimicked SE. It was a very clean, non-energetic, non-visually colorful "event", in which time and space seemed to go away and it left me with a distinctly different relationship with life. I was completely sure that there was something real about the nature of spiritual practice and a big part of my desperate seeking was gone. BUT, no jhanas, no new insight cycle.

Several years later, working with a teacher after a particularly difficult 15 day retreat, I re-established practice in a way that was very consistent and dedicated, day-to-day, and got very good advice on what how my "self" was still holding onto various mental frameworks. When SE occurred, during a sit at home, it was after a few weeks of radically Equanimeous sitting, where I didn't even care what happened anymore, I simply knew I was a life-long meditator and "making progress" was beyond me except for continuing to sit and develop interest and sensitivity to what was occurring moment by moment, and practice itself was leading me into a space of a gentle blend of concentration and insight practice, including feeling the "on task" pleasure of first jhana, the basking in the sun version of second jhana, the cool bliss of third jhana, the spacious clarity of fourth jhana, moments of falling into formless jhanas, vipassana ramping up such that being able to meditate on the thinking process itself where "pre-thought" urges were being seen clearly --- and none of this was done intentionally, it was more just an artifact or consequence of being very interested in the nature of body sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts --- and SE was such a minor event that it barely seemed significant... and yet afterwards, instant access to much harder jhanas and practice really took off in ways I could never have imagined, some of it very difficult, but also very interesting.

So I say all of that just to paint a picture that there really is A LOT of terrain that is hard to imagine in approaching SE and beyond. Meditation is so interesting, but the gateway will always be a curiosity and investigation of our tangible experience of sensations, urges, emotions, and thinking. One common theme to all of the practice I did was asking "where in this moment is there resistance, discomfort, or ill-will? How does it change if I hold that sense of incompleteness or discomfort within my awareness and gently investigate what it really is and all the sensations and emotions and thoughts that seem tangled up with it?"  Many physical and psychological releases and insights came from that simple introspection, curiosity, and investigation. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/9922452)) 

## Review.

Basically after SE, there will be a period where sitting is very jhanic. You sit down and are almost instantly on A&P and it's possible to quickly move through territory and have a fruition or multiple fruition. This is especially true for meditators with stronger jhana skills and those on retreat or practicing a lot. Some "dry" meditators will have much less fireworks along these lines, but sits will feel juicy and pleasurable.  
  
From MCTB: "In this stage, the meditator just keeps practicing largely as before. In this way, they will learn to master the stages of insight, as they must pass through them again each time they wish to re-attain Fruition. The first few times through the cycle after the path has been obtained can sometimes be quite intense and even very disturbing, as the mind tends to be exceedingly powerful for a few days after a path has been gained and yet is navigating in territory that is not yet mastered."  
  
"That said, when a progress of insight is completed, one may notice the mind simply not doing lots of useless things it used to do, and it may seem impossible that it even was able to do them. However, it may take some time to figure out what the permanent implications of the path are and what is just a product of its lingering and transient afterglow. It is likely to take quite a while to really integrate the understandings that come from a path into one's way of being in the world."  
  
It usually takes a few weeks for Review to settle down. Sometimes Review can get overwhelming and people want to slow down or stop for a while --- that's usually a >good< idea. It's a normal time for slowing down and integrating what has happened. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6826429))

## The fastest way to Stream Entry.

People have mixed approaches for the fastest way to Stream Entry. I'm probably biased, but I found that I made more progress by really settling into meditation and letting the mind itself decide when to do jhana and when to do noting. If my mind was clearly in jhana, I would allow it to condition my mind and when I was in a vague or more busy mind state, I would gently note. I would drop noting again if I fell back into jhana. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7093494))

## Could Pointing-Out lead to SE?

I wonder if "pointing out" could ever lead to SE if the student was able to handle the 3rd & 4th Jhana aspects of Equanimity? Hmm... thinking about it more, it's probably a one in a trillion odds. My guess is it necessarily takes many times through EQ before anyone could proceed seamlessly to SE. The 3rd Jhana dissolution-ish aspect would probably be interpreted as "losing EQ" by the first time EQ meditator and especially the 4th Jhana normalcy aspect would be interpreted as "it's gone now". ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/10190061))

## Awakening (to whatever degree) is a double-edged sword.

You become both freer and more aware of the "traps" that are still out there, including remaining internal resistances as well as institutional/social ones. This is really is the heart of the slightly humorous statement "suffering less, but noticing it more"... that's why I like to say that sanity/awakening leads to >better< problems, not to no problems.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/3139959))

## What was I doing when attained Stream Entry.

I was at home. A few months before I went on a two week retreat that had been amazing but left me wrung out and overwhelmed. Lots of concentration states, body movements, crystal clear equanimity, as well as floods of emotions like panic and anxiety -- but all of it experienced as states within awareness, objectified through noting. However, I was feeling very fearful and alone. (Ultimately, I was trying too hard to make things happen -- don't do this!  ) Anyway, I worked with a teacher for a few months, got my practice consistent again, and got back into just the joy of exploring the mind through meditation.

I had confronted my own striving and controlling nature and seen how it caused so much suffering. I had given up on trying attaining anything in practice. By then, I just sat and did my practice and whatever happened, happened. It wasn't in my control, so why get frustrated by it? At the time before stream entry, I was in a kind of blissy state, looking at thoughts as thoughts, meditating on the mindstream, even the thoughts that seemed to be about the thoughts about meditating on the mindstream. It was nice and somewhat spacy/dreamy. And there was a small hiccup in reality, no big deal, and I kept sitting.

It became clearer what had happened a few days later when I noticed things were different, but when had the change occurred? Oh there was that hiccup a few days ago... When I checked in with my teacher, who had been tracking my sits over the months, I barely started describing things and he kinda laughed and said "Yeah, stream entry."

These things are kind of predictable, yet no one knows exactly when it will happen. (My teacher had predicted SE a month earlier, but it just made me all ambitious and threw my sits off for a while!) People who are able to practice with a gentle touch, move through yucky stages with awareness, and continue to sit when nothing much is happening, without trying to control things or overly focusing on expectations... they are doing good work. Even if stream entry never happens, just going through that work makes you saner and happier than people who get angry and frustrated when they have to wait 5 minutes while standing in line...

Retreats greatly help, do them if you can, but retreats aren't essential. However consistent practice is essential 99.999999999999% of the time. Teachers or spiritual friends really help, too. In fact, I was hanging out with two people from the DhO community at the time. One had recently gotten SE and one who had awakened. Seeing that they were normal humans, going to work, raising their families -- that helped normalize the whole deal, too. No big deal, just human awakening. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5984863))

# The Middle & Higher Paths

## Kenneth Folk’s 3 Gears Framework and the four Paths.

Basically, do what works for you … but if there is a general pattern for meditators it would be first gear emphasis for 1st and 2nd path, then second gear emphasis for 3rd, and third gear emphasis for 4th.--- it's an over simplification, but I hope this paints a general picture.   ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11077371)) ([DhO](https://kennethfolkdharma.com/quick-start-guide/))

## A Four Path Model.

We have a sense of self that tries to stay in control. At first we hold on through emotions and when that falls apart: A&P. Then we try to use thoughts and when that falls apart: 1st Path. Then the sense of self gets smart and says, maybe if I disassociate with objects and add in jhana mind states, then I'll keep my hold. But when thoughts and jhanas fall apart: 2nd Path. Then it gets really serious and starts using subtle worldviews and really strong jhanas ... but when worldviews are all seen as empty and jhanas are seen as golden chains and that falls apart: 3rd path. And when the sense of self that was driving all this inquiry gets seen, then the sense of self substantially falls apart: 4th Path. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/15443067))

## A Four Path Model, a summary.

A&P is all the big "spiritual experiences/insights" people have; 1st Path is marked by moving through the nanas and a cessation. Although sometimes it isn't obvious; 2nd Path is marked by another slightly more confused path through the nanas and cessation, with the confusion created by much more access to jhana and vipassana jhana, making the nana terrain much less obvious; 3rd Path is marked by a real-time experience of emptiness... instantly accessible. Third Path is where perception becomes very different. Plus lots of clarity of nanas and jhanas...which eventually leads to the realization the nanas are jhanas are simply states and can't be the answer. No state is an answer and yet everything seems to be a state; 4th Path is marked by a return to normalcy. No desire to use "spirituality" or "perceptions" as a refuge, maybe for fun, but not for refuge. It's actually a very known realm of perception, the most shocking thing is we realize that we've always been in it but never quite noticed it. The closest description is that it is like an equanimity that isn't tied to a state. There isn't an argument with experience. THIS is IT. Unfortunately, there are lots of ways to be confused about whether we've found it or not. It's as subtle as it is deep.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6710711))

## 2nd and 3rd Path.

The important thing about second path is it is completely confusing. The clean progress of insight starts falling apart and things get fractal (stages within stages). It feels like being on a roller coaster ride facing backwards... The most common statement I've made to people working through it is: Straight Ahead!  In other words, just keep doing the practice and stay curious …. Any semblance of a "clean progress of insight" completely falls apart on the road to 3rd Path... So maybe a messy 2nd Path is good preparation for what comes next.   ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/15443067))

## Post 1st Path four practice options.

The not-doing dogma is a dogma like any other fixed view... I'm actually a fan of curiosity in practice. However, the warning against having a "gaining" mindset during practice is a good one. Not seeing that form of greed can causes all kinds of trouble. Here there are some quick possibilities: (1) nailing down the jhanas; (2) meditation on the mindstream; (3) meditation on subtle ill-will/dukkha; (4) meditation on greed/aversion/ignorance co-arising at the point of the experience of a mind object. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6891669))

## 2nd Path.

On the road to 2nd path everything becomes very very confusing. That's the main description. Post SE, the meditator has better perceptual ability, access to light to very hard jhanas, they are making progress on the ñanas but can jump to pre-SE versions of the ñanas, new psychological material comes up, and the body and mind feels like it is re-wiring itself with strange new sensations occurring in the torso and head. So it basically feels like being on a strange roller coaster that seems to be moving forward, but we have no idea what's going on!

Impermanence gets seen / experienced at a whole new level. The fractal view (stages within stages) happens too. So it is very important to adjust the effort of practice. Most of the time, all you have to do is sit down and close your eyes and the mind takes you on the ride.

It's possible to cycle the dark night several times per day. Even several times per sit! There are no rules for how the dukkha ñanas show up post-SE. For some people, it's easier now because they have access to jhana. For other people, new psychological material comes up. For some people, they use way too much effort and burn themselves out. For other people, it's a wild and strange guided tour of the mind. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/14360125))

## Ñanas in 2th Path.

2nd path is basically a process of going through the ñanas again. Be prepared for things to be a little stranger and hard to map because jhanas usually show up more strongly and practice takes on more of a vipassana jhana flavor. The idea of "fractals" in the ñanas starts becoming apparent, too. (In other words, each ñana has a preliminary, early, middle, and mature stage that can feel like the entire range from the first to the last ñana, but it all takes place within a single ñana -- for example, a very mature "Misery" stage can feel like "EQ".) 2nd path tends to be very confusing.

Some people who are inclined to jhanas can actually jump into "going up and down the jhanic arc". It won't go as fast as in [this video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRdiOoTZC3A), but a 2nd Path person inclined to jhana practice can start developing access to the material and immaterial jhanas.

As always, the main thing is to keep a consistent daily sitting practice. Everyone has their own path. Your own path naturally leads onward by consistent practice. There is a certain amount of trusting the process involved; especially the more advanced a meditator you become. There's no particular way to "game" practice. You basically have to show up and go through it.

An interesting thing you will find, especially on retreat, is that aspects of the 1st Path will sometimes "pop up" when things are difficult when working toward 2nd. It's another part of the confusion of this path. For example, you might be having a difficult "Three Characteristics ñana" experience and a fruition will pop up, or you'll see lights and feel bliss. One possible explanation is that the mind is jumping to the first path fruition or first path A&P as sort of a comforting mechanism. This happens a lot in later paths. So it's entirely possible that your mind right now is going to the second vipassana jhana and A&P to help calm the sick body. (It’s also possible that this is simply more review of 1st Path, which can start with A&P.)

It's a very wild ride with all of these different possibilities: old path, new territory, new and stronger jhanas, quick drops into formless jhanas in the midst of vipassana --- the real trick is not to worry too much about where you are on the map, but rather stick to the basics: body relaxed but alert, mind accepting and curious, invigorate practice when dull, relax practice when agitated. That's really all you need to know, but it can be years of practice to turn these basic instructions into instincts.

Also remember, the climb up the ñanas isn't just a climb, it's up and down, up and down, sometimes climbing up into new territory, sometimes dropping down in a way that feels like backsliding --- but that's all fine. The mind goes where it goes and it is totally normal for it to go up and down, even a few times in a single hour sit. So don't think you are doing anything wrong if this happens. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11754545))

Getting 2nd Path is similar but more subtle than 1st Path. You need to notice all your thoughts about practice are mind objects arising on their own. Don't make the mistake of thinking some aspect of experience is off limits. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6737037))

## Kundalini & Rewiring post SE.

Post stream entry, the body will start re-wiring itself, almost to physically incorporate the new glimpse of emptiness/cessation. It's hard to describe, but in the same way that pre-stream entry we "think with our gut" or have "heartfelt feelings" or have "a lump in our throat" or feel "there is something on my mind" there are now re-wirings in all of those nerve centers that give us more expansive ways of having all of those body-mind ways of knowing.

This will show up in different ways, for different people. Some people get skull crushing aches, some people feel love in their heart, some people will feel fear in their gut, some people will feel very sexual, some people will feel panic in their throat, some people will feel bliss in their third eye... and probably all of these will be felt at some time or another.

The tricky thing is people try to make this into a rigid system with a certain numbers of chakras, specific colors, and specific "spinning" at each location for healthy or unhealthy chakras... This is not so helpful. It's sort of similar to when people try to control their pre-stream entry meditation by trying to create an experience of the Progress of Insight ñanas or trying to force the experience of the next ñana that they think is needed to make progress. Too much manipulation! Too much control!

The truth of it is the body/mind does all of this stuff for us. We just need to sit and experience what is happening, the same way we just needed to sit and feel all the thoughts/feelings/emotions we felt during pre-stream entry practice. There isn't a way to make it go faster or to "game" the meditation. What is happening is what needs to be experienced.

Probably the most helpful thing I can add is all of this is normal. Experience what is happening let your heart/body/mind rest within that experience.

The old rules apply: if things seem dead, energize your sitting posture, brighten your mind, and play closer attention. If things see too overpowering, relax your posture, calm your mind, and even try walking practice to help bleed off the extra tensions/energy. If things are neither dead nor overpowering, experience what is happening and rest in that experience. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/3795572))

Kundalini is very much an up to 1st and up to 2nd path thing. Some people go through a lot of purification during first path, mostly associated with the dark night nanas, with experiences of negative sensations passing and the "release" that follows". This is has a feel of psychological-spiritual refinement, finding union with the shadow, etc. There is a lot of change, but the self/body doesn't really change that much.

Pretty much everyone goes through a significant body rewiring up to 2nd path. This rewiring feels deeper that psychological shadow, more with the processing system, and the chakra "idea" becomes much more obvious as an experience. The rewiring really does cluster around the chakra areas, but it is also clear that much of the chakra descriptions are poetry and not literally specific colors or spins -- but definitely something is happening there. This is also when people can have fruitions and immaterial jhana experiences, which really adds a lot of dimensions to the psyche and the body/mind really feels like it has changed. In fact, people may begin to identify with these subtle changes and think that enlightenment must be the complete/deep rewiring of the body/mind.

Ironically, this view of deep rewiring falls apart during the road to 3rd path. Instead of becoming "better" better wired, more sensitive, more pure... what actually happens is that the empty/meaningless aspect starts becoming evident. This is a huge shock to our pride. During second path we thought we were becoming the ultimate sage, pure body, pure jhanas, etc. While the changes keep occurring to some degree or another, depending on the person, what becomes really obvious is that all experiences come and go, so they can't be "it". So this stage tends to be when kundalini dies down. Also, the changes in purity and sensitivity, etc. just make it easier to see more subtle impurity and insensitivity -- in a weird way it feels like we have taken two steps forward and one step back. People find all sorts of ways to rationalize this and say that spirituality ends before 3rd path is reached.

The road to 4th path is all about making peace with how things actually are, without sugar coating it, and yet still investigating, even investigating the investigating. It's a very subtle blend of inquiry and not-doing in a way that can't be appreciated by someone that hasn't gone through all the changes above. It is very very subtle and yet requires very very strong psychological resilience. It's looking right at nothingness and not loving, not hating, and not blinking. It has aspects of looking at the "I will die" sensation in the psyche. By this stage, there isn't much kundalini, except for odd moments when really strong jhanas will hit, almost like a protective mechanism, when things get too edgy or cut too close to "self". People find all sorts of ways to rationalize this and might say that spirituality ends before 4th path is reach. 4th path really clarifies the thing that drove the search in the first place in a paradoxical way, with the intention to search being what the searching was trying to find.  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7095859))

There are whole traditions that make these side effects into some metaphysical model of reality (e.g., the body really has chakras, which have particular colors, which have particular spins and frequencies...) but with more experience you'll see that there is some general basis for this, but reality is a lot more complicated/sloppy.

I really like the idea that most of these things are artifacts of the body/mind complex re-wiring itself, side effects so to speak. Most people's body/mind goes through a period of change during 1st and 2nd paths especially. The general domain of 3rd is usually less body-changing and more perception-changing. The general domain of 4th tends to make the body go flat for a while, followed by a rapid recalibration, followed by much more groundedness/stability/resilience. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6184257))

## The Middle Paths:

Things get a little different in the middle area of the overall path to awakening. The older practices of really diving into sensations and the raw data of experience tend to yield fewer results at this stage. The progress of insight model tends to fall apart or at least is much less important... In the middle area, "views" become the most important aspect of experience to investigate. Notice how a "worldview" creates a "world". Of course, this is already obvious to some degree, but this is time for really refining things. To make it simple, you could simply notice how "ill-will" creates suffering. Or you could learn and apply the 6 realms ideas. Or you could learn some of the other Mahayana type techniques in “Wake Up To Your Life” by Ken McLeod. The main thing is to notice that "worldviews" creates suffering, not just resistance to raw sensations. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/18032557))

The goal in the middle paths is the transition from initial mindfulness to advanced understanding of emptiness. In 1st & 2nd Paths, it is all about noticing how individual sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts are not self and come and go. But the middle and later stage of the path is all about seeing how conceptual frameworks (views) are not self (empty) of a permanent truth, that they arise as hypotheses and come and go. Making progress requires samadhi/relaxation/concentration, of course, but it also involves these kinds of insights into the mind. And these insights into the mind tend to come when we are at ease, relaxed, and centered. Notice how both reinforce each other. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/11544162))

## The path to 3rd Path.

I would say that the path to 3rd Path is about seeing the "sameness" in every perception, including self, and that sameness is "emptiness". There are two aspects of this path:

(1) concentration/jhanas seriously kick in, if you are wired this way. All the jhanas and formless realms are at least touched on if not dwelled in. This is (nearly) endlessly fascinating.

(2) conventional perception, including the nanas, is really seen to be constructed from basic building blocks. As a result, there is a lot more freedom in life.

The mature side of 3rd Path comes with the depressing realization that the jhanas and the new freedoms are just even more whiz-bang experiences -- which if you are wise, you'll see as more evidence of the same emptiness of perception.

When all of these perceptions/insights are really established, you can go through nana cycles as if it is running in the background. You'll probably have lots of fruitions. But one of nanas cycles will go deep enough (or really, it might be better to say, they will become so shallow as to be insignificant) and a third path fruition will occur. It will have the same sense of completion as the previous two paths.

Just because all of this begs the question --- fourth path is very similar, except the concepts/perception of an independent/observing self and enlightenment are seen through completely. This is really subtle stuff and indeed relates to a very basic sense of "pride".

Adding on: as far as practice goes, at this point mindfulness is probably a default state and noting/noticing happens fairly automatically. So practice can really do itself. All that has to be balanced is alertness and relaxation, the mind does its thing. The mind will go into concentration states and will instinctually investigate things that seem like ill will/hindrances. So it's mostly "getting out of your own way". Anything that seems like a road block should be investigated to find its inherent emptiness, concentration states should be enjoyed and dwelled in to condition the mind. It's a fascinating path so enjoy! ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6013645))

## Lead up to 3rd Path.

The observation/realization that the cycles do themselves was an instrumental observation for me in the lead-up to my 3rd Path moment. Basically I was on a 10 day retreat and meditation did itself for the whole time. I watched the mind get centered, watched it go in and out of jhana, watched in go in and out of mindfulness, watched an insight cycle come and go with no desire to push or pull on it, which really points out not-self in a whole different way. Not-self applies to both the sense of being a meditator and the sense of identifying with any quality of the mind itself. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6891669))  
Conceit and Agitation. Ultimately, I'm pointing squarely at conceit and agitation. Both of these things are so basic and so human, they hide in plain sight. They are not something unknown to the beginning meditator, but they are so essential that it's only someone with a strong practice that can actually isolate and work with these things.  
  
Conceit goes in three directions: I'm better, I'm worse, I'm the same as... All of those lock a self into some "thing", even if that thing is a value judgement. In a very deep way, it lets you know who you are. You are a strong practitioner, you are a deeply fettered practitioner, you're doing about the same as your peers. If you pick the version that seems to be most true, you can feel how your body settles. Of course everyone has all of these that show up and it can be useful to triad noting throughout the day "better", "same", "same", "better", "worse", "same". That will really highlight this fetter and make it unable to hide. It's also worth looking where the comfort zone is. For me it was mostly "same". I'm going through the same stuff my friends did in their practice, so I'm on the right track. Ahhh. I'm working with the right teacher, I'm doing the right methods, I seem to be making the same progress. Ahhh. But "same" is just as blinding and the other two, it blocks awareness of distinctions and the actual nature of what is. For some people, they only feel safe it they are better than others. Some people feel safe if they can point to someone else who is better and say "I'm worse". It's worth thinking about what "the middle path" would be. Being in a way where these considerations, while not denied, don't really seem to hit home as being the full story.  
  
Agitation is what is being pointed to when a solid sense of conceit goes away. It doesn't leave cleanly. In its place it leaves a rough textured sense of not really feeling right or feeling a little too right. Agitation goes in two ways. You'll have to find your own words. For me it was "inadequate" and "superior". For others it could be "wrong and "right". This isn't pointing to big moral or social statements. Just two shades of gray, one slightly warm and positive, another slightly cool and negative. Both of which are clearly seen as not self, that isn't the agitation, yet somehow they do agitate.  
  
Inadequate is the word I used for sensing that something wasn't quite right but any "method" would be a manipulation of what is. In a very very subtle way, I needed to do something. Again, I'm pointing to something very subtle. It's not the gross aversion that we see in early practice. This is an experience that appears very clearly, arises without creating a reaction chain, is known as a fetter, doesn't disturb the mind, disappears completely, is known as not self completely. So on one hand, no problem, yet it agitates by the very nature of it happening. It just seems wrong in some way. Like a speck of dust landing on your glasses that flies away the next moment. Nothing was really bothered, yet you don't like it. You get the sense that this little speck of dust could set off a whole reactive chain of aversion if your mind wasn't clear at that moment.  
  
Superior was the word I used for things feeling right. But again, this isn't the gross attraction/greed that is felt in early practice. It's an experience that appears very clearly, doesn't trigger a reactive pattern of clinging, disappears completely, is known as not self completely. Yet the fact that it happens seems wrong. You have a deep sense that this "superiorness" is an overlay that doesn't hurt anything, but it doesn't help, and maybe if our mind wasn't clear it could set off a greedy quest for something, so somehow this almost nothing experience seems to agitate deeply.  
  
Agitation is that subtle feeling of vulnerability or false certainty which is at the same time self-evident. It isn't a nana or a poison. It isn't the Fear nana or gross Aversion, nor the awesome A&P nana or gross Attraction. It's the subtlest form of these things that can be.  
  
This is another thing that you can note throughout the day. I found it very helpful to go around noting superior and inadequate. What is interesting to me is the right set of words eventually localized this experience in my body right at the heart. It was close enough to "the right side of the heart" that it made me all excited because lots of traditions make this observation. Then I noted "superior" and went on with my practice emoticon. It's helpful to also remember heart means mind in a lot of old languages, so treating this as something just in the body is probably too reductive. But this very subtle very basic agitation is very much the unenlightened "you".  
  
Then my teacher said, I'm sorry about this but there isn't anything more to teach. This would be cruel to say to a new meditator. But again, with being sensitive to fine distinctions, that helped point out any remaining subtle agitation. The practice I was given was no distraction, no control, no practice. It was on a short weekend retreat maybe a few months later that I "saw" what the subtle agitation was. It was me. The me that needed fixing for my entire life. And yet because it was seen as not me, I couldn't be confused again. But nothing else changed, so I still have a lot of work to do, so to speak. But I'm not able to stand apart and triangulate on what needs to be done anymore -- because that triangulation is in its essence an agitation, a conceit, ill will for what is, etc. -- so it also seems like things just change. And sometimes something comes up in my life that's so massively flawed in my personality,  that I marvel that I could have ever made such subtle meditation practice when I was overlooking this big elephant, a problem that I can triangulate on and work to fix because it is so basically wrong. I'm definitely not a perfect human being. All of these are true and they don't seem to conflict anymore. There seems to be a middle path that continues which isn't constrained by awakened or unawakened in the same solid sense anymore. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5641020)) 

## Wrathful Dieties.

I definitely tend to sidestep a lot of direct demon thinking/confrontation, but one of the most powerful things to have available -- in case of emergency, break glass -- is the intention/wish "if it will benefit all beings, may it happen", as in "if these circling demons might decend upon me, if will benefit all beings, may it happen. Whatever happens, may it benefit all beings."  
  
People who are new to this stuff should be aware that sometimes apparent demons are actually wrathful dharmic dieties who basically are teaching "If you think you can get completely out of the interdependent world, what about this?" Wrathful dieties should hopefully connect us to the empowerment of the deepest feeling of "this is bullshit and needs to stop". Basically, to really honor the wrathful dharmic deities, you need to recognize the existence of needless suffering they are pointing out and take action. Wrathful dieties are so blatently destructive to absolutely move us and motivate action. This motivation is so strong that it overrides our sense of needing to be perfect before taking action. Our actions will probably be imperfect and have residual, but no big deal, it then informs the next action.  The wraithful deities will find a way to take you out of your comfort zone and make you honor them through awareness and action. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6329343))

## 6 Realms Teachings.

A while ago I put some very very high-level notes on different 6 realms teachings [here](http://awakenetwork.org/magazine/shargrol/253) (Trungpa, McLeod, AroTer).

I highly recommend the 6 Realms framework as a way to discover how our unconscious orientations create our perceived experience. Basically, in each moment that is not awake, we will have an prejudiced orientation toward the world. This bias, which is closer than close and rarely seen, will determine what we look for and therefore how we react to the world. But if you are conscious of this, then suddenly we are much more responsive rather than reactive to the state of things.

The basic Buddhist idea is that we keep getting psychologically reborn into the present moment, and we can be reborn as hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, titan, or gods. Each birth will be motivated by an unconscious orientation, in the hell realm it's anger/vengeance, in hungry ghost it's greed/addiction, in animal world it is automatic habits, in human it is desire, in titan it is ambition, in gods it is pride.  And from that seed, an entire worldview is created.

In a way, this is ultimately what Jungian individuation becomes--- looking upstream into how we "frame" experience through different paradigms, ultimately arriving at very primal structures in the mind. Thinking about it more, a basic framework could be Jungian shadow work, 6 realms work, and the 5 element work (5 elements is an even more refined framework, dealing with much more immediate flashes of un-awakeness which eventually lead to the 6 realms).

Ken McLeod’s “Wake Up To Your Life book” has good 6 realms and 5 elements discussion/practices. There are also good podcast/recordings on unfetteredmind.org ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5225304))  

## 5 Elements / Dakini.

5 Element/Dakini practice is all about seeing the reactive patterns that come from an experience of middle path/nothing in particular and points to an ever subtler version of "realm". In this practice, if you are slightly fixed/ridgid in the face of impermance (earth element), an experience of nothing in particular will feel vaguely unstabilizing, which will cause subtle grabbing to an aspect of experience to define yourself against. The metaphor is when the earthquake comes, you feel off balanced, and you grab onto something to hold. 5 Element practice is a combination of visualizing and acting out all of these very primal ways we instinctually (it takes maybe 1/20th or 1/10th of a second) react when slightly off balanced.   
  
I did both of the 6 Realms and 5 Elements work as self-directed study, which really prepared me for working with a teacher on mahamudra type practice. Because 6 Realms and 5 Elements requires a lot of self investigation, visualizing, investigating, role playing, I think it actually is well suited for self-study. It relies on the practioner being very very honest and intimate with how their body/mind clings, which is something that can't be "taught". I'll bet this was the kind of practice that was given to a yogi with the teacher's instructions, "do this for a few months and then let's talk." emoticon The student has to be at a point where they can do the work, and they have to do the work.   
  
5 Element was by far my favorite (!) practice and helped me so much that I'm somewhat amazed it isn't talked about much. It's done on the cushion but after a few months it can be something that is seen in real time. Amazingly helpful. If someone has the sensitivty to see those micro reactions, it really is one of the most sophisticated practices I've ever seen on honing right in to the essence of clinging. It builds a basic experiential literacy with primal clinging in the face of imperminance, basically creating a method for approaching Bare Attention and awareness of Change. Of course, the point of all of this is to build the capacity and then let it do it's work. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5641020)) 

## 6 Realms + 5 Elements, Presence.

it seems like most people use noting/jhana for a big part of their early work and make good progress, but then they have to transition to something else to really tease away the remaining blindspots and resistances.  
  
Even though people in this stage have nearly instant access to "the state of presence" -- it has the flavor of still being state-like and there still being some sense that "I have" and  "that state". And these people tend to have much less distinction between formal practice and living life... but they notice during practice and during off-cushion life there are times of easy "going with the flow" and other times of "somehow still stuck". There is still some existential tension and very subtle suffering that kinda bugs us and it's really hard to tell the root cause...   
  
So much of the latter part of practice involves 1) the suffering created by "worldviews" and 2) the tiny reactive patterns that take hold when confronted by not-knowing.  
  
(My opinion on the best text for this stage of practice is Wake Up to Your Life, by Ken McLeod -- which is a fairly jargon-free description of the practice done in a tibetian three-year retreat. Definitely skip over stuff that seems basic, the book was written for all audiences, but the practices themselves are really intended to be used very advanced ways.)   
  
The suffering of worldviews is how we make some basic assumptions about how life is or should be and then get subtly frustrated when things don't line up. Usually we'll blame ourselves for something we're doing wrong... but often at this stage it's our worldview that is flawed. And most of these worldviews are founded on some simple assumption, like the event being being wrong, or not enough, or the same as it was in the past, or inherently satisifying, or an accomplishment, or an escape. Usually these are associated with subtle proto-emotions of opposition, greed, dullness, desire, ambition, and pride. This is the classic 6 realms teaching and being reborn in realms --- hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, asuras, and devas -- but for very advanced meditators. It focuses on the subtle psychology of identity.  
  
The suffering of tiny reactive patterns is how, when faced with actual freedom, we instinctively react to maintain some sense of self. We either try to hold onto some idea, or avoid some kind feeling of danger, or enhance some distracting desire, or rush make ourselves busy, or freak out --- and these little reactions occur within about 1/4 of a second after we have a moment when our normal I-based coordinate system falls away. This is the classic 5 elements teaching -- earth, water, fire, air, and void --- but again it's for very advanced meditators. It focus on the subtle existential threat caused by "non-existance".   
  
I provide that as food for thought. Many times people chase fruitions and jhanas and NS as something that will "fix" the suffering of worldviews and reactive patterns. My approach was to go directly into the worldviews and reactive patterns that cause suffering and untangle them. My mind would fall naturally into jhanas, but from my perspective it was more like my mind was using jhana to avoid directly experiencing the inherent dukka of views and reactions -- so more of a very advanced avoidance mechanism! I found that directly experiencing the inherent suffering of the 6 realms (so to speak) and the inherent suffering of the 5 elements (so to speak) provided what I needed to see why I was still clinging to an "I" and a "no-I".  
  
The state of presence is very seductive and seems to be a refuge, but it's state-like nature is a bit of a give away. The state of presence is still a very subtle contraction, which you can detect because it still is a \_state\_. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/20239836))

## Spontaneity / Agencyless.

The Spontaneity/Agencyless aspect can feel oddly "wrong" for a while, simply because of the old habit of analyzing/investigating. Conversely, sometimes non-spontaneity/agency can become demonized as less awake but there really are times we need to think things through/take ownership and be careful.

The middle path is to trust that the really is an intelligence that leads onward and let yourself fall into spontaneity and non-spontaneity as the mind chooses and experience all of it mindfully/intimately. Doubt is probably pretty minimal now, it should be clear that awareness itself is sensitive/intelligent and learns to see things that we never could have anticipated or made to happen.

Paths tend to be described by something that is absent or something that is present, that's just the nature of language and can be helpful to point out when someone is blind to something absent or something present. But the later paths are much closer to seeing "what is the mind that experiences both absence and presence" or "what knows?" regardless of the content of experience.

The pleasure of this domain often comes from moments without greed, aversion, or ignorance -- just the clean pleasure of knowing this moment and accepting this moment without greed, aversion, or ignorance. You are absolutely encouraged to enjoy this state. I want to jokingly caution: don't vipassana the shit out of it because when we let ourself be at ease we become even more sensitive to the subtlest greed, aversion, and ignorance that still exist by first dwelling in ease, not pre-emptively and blindly trying to eradicate dukkha.

So the path forward is a lot less intentional renunciation and a lot more simple guilt-free appreciation of the moment, as an expression of the renunciation you have already developed, which will then allow subtle dukkha to be subtly detected, almost like a slight "haze" or "scent", which leads to the next subtle dropping of dukkha, etc. There is more and more of a sense that sitting practice is only one aspect of this and practice and life starts fusing together more and more.

And of course normal life goes on, which requires all the normal kinds of doing, the laundry, the grocery, the dating, the working... Bringing practice into all of those things -awareness, appreciation and dealing with the difficult life stuff- is high-level practice. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8000920))

## Enlightenment is not a state.

Lots of enlightenment porn talks about enlightenment being a state. Some types of porn describe it as blissful or peaceful. Some describe it as jagged and on the edge of sanity. Some describe it as funny and humorous. Some say it is intellectually perfect. Some say and every action is completely effortless. Some say it's none of that but rather is "non-dual", and there are various attempts to define non-dual without falling into the earlier types of descriptions... It's not a state. That's a classic trap. If someone is experiencing reality as a state, there is a contraction still present that still isn't being objectified. Any state that is observable also implies an observer of that state. If you are ever in a state that seems like it might be enlightenment, just ask "what is the mind that observes this state?". When mind is understood...it's an insight, not a state. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/4116801)) 

## Trascending (a chosen) duality.

The (apparent) binaryness of things can be a clue/practice. The trick is to find a binary that really speaks to you. Maybe true self/no self, maybe enlightened/not enlighted  --- but don't necessarily use dharma terms. Use what it really seems/feels like. For me, it was superior and inferior. So I'll just use that in my explanation...  
  
I would walk around noticing when I felt on top of things, knowing what was going on and feeling in control and say (mentally) "superior". When I felt like I was missing something and didn't know what I was doing I would say "inferior". Eventually I could feel that viscerally. Then I started inducing that feeling, consciously deciding to take on "superior" or "inferior" attitude and live from that orientation. It didn't feel fake at all. I could really feel what it was like to choose to be truly superior and truly inferior. I played with that like breaking a paperclip by bending it back and forth, back and forth, back and forth... Do that until you are sick of it.   
  
Eventually, there is a sense of something that transcends that duality... and it can come from exploring -- this is neither superior or inferior, those are both states that get overlayed on "this",  so what is this experience? I was in a business meeting at the time and suddently it was like I went from looking at an aquarium to being in the aquarium --- just for a moment. This was my first non-dual experience. Luminosity is really apparent in the non-dual experience.  
  
Then cultivate the experience of non-duality by deeply relaxing... and do it again.  
  
Just as a big of a teaser... it's possible to make a duality out of non-duality, which is basically the last binary that gets seen through. And oddly enough, what is seen is the nature of seeking itself.  
  
By the way, it's okay to skip all the steps and just notice that seeking is a sensation. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6295462))

## Non-Dual Insight.

States of mind (from crude to extremely pure states) can come and go. The non-dual insight doesn't go away. The tricky thing is that the non-dual insight/awakening is extremely unlikely to happen unless the practitioner has experienced extremely pure states. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/14360117))

## Presence is a very unstable state unless we have done a lot of ‘cleaning-up’ through different therapeutic, meditative, investigative modalities.

"Presence" or "Natural Mind" or "The absence of greed, aversion, and indifference" --- oh whatever words are used --- it is so strikingly different than the narrow, petty, claustrophobic experience that we normally have. It is wonderfully open, luminous, clear, free, joyful, compassionate, appreciative, caring, friendly, accepting... it really is good. This state is basically the completion of all spirituality.... and also, very very very ironically, the beginning.  This is the best way I can speak about it after 30 years of beating my head against the wall trying to figure it out and say it clearly...

The deep paradox is that Presence is always available, we simply turn our mind to it; however, we never "have it" and so it can seem to slip away even though it is always available.

For many people, myself included, we can remember a moments in time in childhood or teenage years where there was a moment of everything being so simple and so intimate and so direct --- this glimpse of presence --- that it served as a mirror to how we felt about the nature of our own Self, simple and good. But it doesn't last long, we go back to the sense of being a struggling and divided self, on one hand being proud (and self-centered) and on the other hand feeling inadequate (and wanting to learn and be of service). This dichotomy seems to create the necessary tension to go out and explore the world and develop...

Later in life, usually around the mid-teens/early 20s, the sense of being a divided self can be quite strong. The ways of adapting to the world that we inherited without thinking (values/habits) are full of contradictions and are limiting, we're becoming adults but are very confused. During this time we can remember the simple sense of presence and want to figure out "a way" to get back to it. This is when people try different spiritual practices or drugs or extreme ritualistic stuff or therapy to get into an altered state that can access this basic state of present... And we do have moments where we drop into Presence again. And yes this can even come from someone pointing us to this basic "state" (which isn't a state, but let's call it a state for now.)

And we see the paradox: Presence is always available, yet always elusive if we get caught up in the verbal thinking mind and the sensual/emotional body. And the verbal thinking mind has momentum, is a habit, and the sensual/emotional body is so beguiling. So how on earth do we get out of this trap?

This is where the >process< of true meditation occurs. Unfortunately, while we can quickly jump to presence, it is a very unstable state unless we have done a lot of "cleaning up" through different therapeutic/meditative/investigative modalities. Basically, the mind is full of partially completed thoughts, feelings, battles and romances, and all of that stuff is floating around deep in our mind. We also have not fully developed as a psychological adult -- there are also basic patterns of repression and defense that are on autopilot.

So the big temptation is to say "I know Rigpa, I know the non-dual perspective, I know Grace, I know Presence" and therefore I don't have to do any work.

But here's the test: can you sit for a half hour a day and be Present? No problem, no tension, no frustration, no boredom, no claustrophobia, no fantasizing of being somewhere else? It doesn't mean we're bad people if not, it just points to the reality that there is more that can be done developmentally. And remember, some people can kind of "turn off" for a half hour and they think they are spiritually advanced, but what do their friends and colleagues think? Does this person bring presence and compassion into the real world? Many "spiritual" people convince themselves of being far more perfect than the person everyone else sees in real life!

Meditation provides a context for seeing the vividness and intimacy of experience (Presence) and the tension/resistance (Dukkha) of the mind. In ideal practice, we are attentive to how these states come and go and we develop a very primal, pre-verbal appreciation for the openness and freedom of presence. Ironically, if we "try" to "have" presence, that's the function of the clinging mind and we fail. So we have to learn to >allow< the clear vividness of experience to arise. Also, ironically, eventually we see the non-Dukkha nature of thoughts and feelings so they are no longer a problem, but in practice it feels like we are being bounced in and out of Presence, in and out of Dukkha...

Which sound very simple, but it becomes complicated because whenever there is a relaxing, some part of our "self" feels vulnerable, and all this psychological stuff will come up. So the process is as much psychological --- in all of its complexities --- as it is about Presence.

The conclusion of spirituality is an untarnished understanding of Presence. Early in practice, it feels like a "state", but when we look at it closely, the characteristics of state-ness cannot be found. Similar to mind: show me your Mind. Everything that you show me will be the contents of your mind, not your Mind. Show me your Self.

There are many statements about the nature of Presence or what is Mind or who I Am. No one says we have to figure it for ourselves. But if people want to explore it, through meditation or some other practice, we have to be prepared to have the rug pulled out from under us, time and time again, as our confused thoughts about Presence or Mind or I or Self are seen through.

This seeing though process that un-confuses Presence is mappable (e.g. progress of insight to stream entry, 4 paths for awakening -- and of course there are others) even though no map is needed to access Presence. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/10190061))

## Natural Mind.

Windshield off and nothing between you and the world now, that’s perfect. For what it's worth, there are two things that my teacher said to me at this point. The first was to say that this was usually a promising sign, in his tradition it was called natural mind. The second thing was a bit of a caution and encouragement and a warning all wrapped together: That this natural mind should be recognized as yet another state of mind, because it is recognizable, has a quality, feels a certain way. And yet it is as high as you can go on the mountain, which means the next step isn't onto more mountain, it's a step into space, into nothing. And finally, he said that the step often involves realizing what was at the heart of your motivation, your seeking. For some people it is a search to feel safe, in which case we have to give up hope for ever being safe (because we truly never are safe). For me, my seeking was to "know what I need to do" and I had to give up hope of ever being certain that I knew what to do (because we never truly know what to do). For someone else it might be being special, knowing something transcendent, becoming fully embodied, always being clear, never feeling fear, really there are infinite possibilities --- and really it isn't these words but rather a pre-verbal intuition or feeling. But the last step off the mountain usually means jumping into the possibility of not getting what you sought. It sort of feels like having your last breath leave your body at death. There is a reason some traditions call this "dying before you die". And you can imagine-act that out a little: inhale an extra 20%, hold an extra 20% longer, and then let it leave... there is silence, life is DONE.

And you imagine-act your way there... or you might accidently fall into that void... It happened to me as I was doing simple metta on a weekend retreat, very relaxed. May I be well, may all beings be well. In breath, out breath... and then a primal terror and then going into that terror... And then you are done. Everything is unchanged, yet totally different, because you are not trying to get something you could never get in the first place. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8334133))

## Difference between Presence and Non-Duality.

Presence is extremely natural and common and could be said to be the default experience in a certain sense. But there is definitely something that happens with dedicated meditation practice: the ability to "see" how the sense of observer is created by a kind of centering around a sensation. Yes, the crazy thing is we think the self is one thing, but when we track "selfing" in experience, it jumps around all over the place. Gradually the self-as-sensation sense of identity is seen as not-self, but it doesn't end there. Then we identify with things like the experience of space or the experience of clarity. Those are odd ways of centering around a particular aspect of mind and calling it Self, more advanced, but still based on a confusion. Eventually the "centering" aspect falls away. This could be called fourth path. It's not a state. There can still be "self-sensations" but there is no confusion that it is really a self that needs to be identified with or protective. So it's a more free state of what is normally experience, but not a radically different state. Still, it's is important to say that "presence" is not the end... unless you have gotten to the end and it's that kind of very rare presence. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/17253004))

## When the experience re-congeals into subject-object.

What typically happens is when you ask an inquiry question, you will for a split second (a flash) see nothing. And then the experience will re-congeal into subject-object. Where I would go next is to look very closely at that moment of re-congealing. That's where the thing you need to see is. Resting afterwards in non-duality is a good thing. It's very similar to how resting in jhana conditions the mind for previous paths. But 4th path is different because it goes beyond all dualities and states. The very very very tricky thing about normal non-dual state is very close to 4th path, we are aware of it. How is that possible??? What becomes clear is the clear, lucid, panoramic, easy, complete experience IS STILL A STATE. If it is a state, then it can't be the answer. So what's next is not being deceived by states, no matter how good they are, and keep asking questions --- not because there is an intellectual answer, not because there is an experience that is the answer, but because there is an >insight< that is very very close and easy to overlook. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6251086)) 

## The end is fundamentally an insight, not an experience.

When approaching the limit, most meditators will have experienced many very very very clear experiences of both the pure awareness state (‘integrated thought and awareness’ in the DhO poster terms) and the pure objective state (‘immersed in a sensation’). When those views are really cleared up, then the knot of the self can be clearly seen for what is. And that's what is the important thing. It becomes clear that the important thing is not which one of those views are correct, but the actual longing of the self that has been seeking and desiring "what is correct?" this entire time.  
  
Now some people say, the seeker is the problem, call off your search -- but this is bullshit. Other people say, the seeker is the problem, kill the self -- which is also bullshit. It is much more appropriate to say know yourself very thoroughly and you will know what you can let go of. And obviously a big part of knowing yourself is also directly understanding how your awareness works.  
  
We all have the tendency to think of the end state (the limit, awakening, enlightenment, fourth path, etc.) as a state. But obviously all state-like experiences are limited experiences. The end is fundamentally an >insight<, not an experience.  
  
Hopefully this makes you curious about your actual experience, rather than turning it into an intellectual thought problem. I tried to think myself to the answer and it was a real waste of a decade or more. So much better to just have a simple meditation practice, just a short sitting time, and become used to sitting for no good reason, and let the mind untangle itself. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6723815))

## Late 3rd Path.

3rd path is all about getting confused about the little things. For example, we can say that there is no agency, but we are worried about what we are supposed to do. (see the contradiction?) Or we can say nothing is sacred, but still we think the narrator is a special problem. Or we can say we have no center point, but we think there is something that isn't fully awake. This is classic late 3rd path.

The classic saying is:

Too close - you can't recognize it.

Too profound - you can't appreciate it.

Too simple - you can't believe it.

Too good - you can't accept it.

When you see it, it's a WHOA! moment. I almost said Oh Fuck!! out loud on retreat. Late 3rd is about not recognizing it, or seeing it and not appreciating it, ESPECIALLY denying it as too simple to be the answer, and rejecting it because it seems too easy. "One integrated field with all the sense modalities and thoughts and the rest all together in one fluxing 3D shifting self-illuminating space" is the sensation of wiping your butt with scratchy toilet paper. Simple. Exact. Gone as quick as it appears. Ordinary is already non-dual -- how do we overlook something so obvious? Once you see it, you can't unsee it. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6251086))

## The classic 4th Path problem.

Usually there is a period of time afterwards where practice seems useless and unnecessary. And then there is the little tickle that something isn't "done", there must be something that is being "overlooked". That's the classic 4th path problem. And usually it is resolved by looking very closely at this remaining "I am" experience. Not that "I am" is wrong and needs to go away forever --- that's more of a 3rd Path attitude. On the road up to 4th, there is simply the curiosity about "what does it mean 'not to be done'?" and "what does it mean when I say/think 'I am' if I have seen through the I-am-ness of sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts? What am I missing?" ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7095859))

## The real test of 4th Path.

The real test of 4th Path is how people relate to their actual felt sense of being "superior" or "inadequate". That's kind of "An ANSWER!" after all.

Because here's the deal: at the heart of all spiritual quests is a sense of self. That sense of self causes us to search for experiences that will either further solidify our sense of being superior or will work to erase our sense of being inadequate. Everyone is motivated by these two things. 100% of all practioners.

The most striking thing about these two mind states is that we truly, truly, truly believe them. We can hold almost every other experience as "just an experience" "not self" "sameness" "just a passing experience" --- but if we look at our actual experience, we always believe that there is truth to the experience of "being superior" or "being inadequate".

When we fuck up and get angry and over-react and feel shame. We don't doubt that feeling of being inadequate.

When our experiences line up with someone describing the path to enlightenment... we don't doubt our feels of being superior.

This is the last knot of self. Self has many layers, but the final tangle is "good/bad", "superior/inadequate". We'll continue "working on enlightenment" until this knot is clearly clearly seen. And when it's seen, it untangles itself. Done.

4th path forever blows up the concrete reality of achievement and failure. Life goes on. There can be pursuits, but they always seem to find themselves in a no-man's land -- is this right or wrong, good or bad, will it make me superior to how I am now or will it actually corrupt me and make me inferior to how I am now? There is momentary knowing, but ultimately you just don't know. Which sounds awful, but you know you don't know -- which is an interesting kind of comfort. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5715677))

## 4th Path and the humility in being a lump of red flesh after all.

At a certain point, all the gross impurities burn off, and you are left with a feeling/experiencing organism which still feels tension and discomfort but it becomes clear, in time, that this tension and discomfort isn't "wrong" or "not spiritual", rather it reflects the reality of this meat computer needing to navigate a changing world. There is a wise sense that we will always be a work in progress. There can be a tendency to avoid this idea and the normal living aspect of tension/discomfort/pain feelings etc. --- which is basically spiritual bypassing. This is really really common up to 3rd Path, so to speak. It can take a lot to let go of this idea of perfection and find the humility in being a lump of red flesh after all. But there is also a huge relief associated with this realization, as you can imagine when a perfectionist finally really does r...e...l...a...x.  Perfection is not required for awakening, wow! And yet the habitual mindfulness/release continues. For me it was like watching my body/mind doing spiritual practice on its own, while realizing that all of that activity was sort of beside the point. I could let go when practice itself, the intensity of seeking, was indulgent. I saw the futility in the ignorance of spiritual bypassing mentality (i.e., pretending I was any different that I was.) Hard to explain, but the result is a big drop in tension. Practice was basically doing itself and I could trust it and if I was imperfect, no big deal.

This is about when people can become very good spiritual teachers because they finally have the patience for people going through their problems, in their own way, in their own time, with their own thoughts... there is much less of a need to fix people or to make them think right. It's possible to see how everyone is working out their problems in their own way and they just need a nudge this way of that, at most. It's usually obvious at this point that all philosophies/models/map help as much as they hurt. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7095859))

## Ego Development and the humbling and even deflating sense of seeing through the Self at 4th.

All our ego development in our life has been motivated by a sense of weak and illusive self. As children and teenagers and early adulthood we sense the self arising and passing and we attempt to building up the ego to make it solid and unpassing. This is good healthy human development.

It doesn't work out the way we planned, though, and as adults we don't become solid and singular. We start realizing even greater nuance to the ego and it's manifestation. A healthy adult has many versions of themselves, social roles/identies, which arise and pass, appropriately and according to the situation. But the shifting between roles and identities always feels a bit awkward and unauthentic so we keep investigating...

Then meditation comes along and really helps promote a sane flow of identifications and "selves" and allows ego to flux and change according to the situation in a much more radical way. All of the experiential aspects that seemed to make up ego roles/identities are seen through at a smaller and smaller detail. Sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts are seen to be the component pieces. Big chunks of identity are seen through because they are seen as fabricated from smaller elements of sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts. We realize that to become more resilient and sane, we need to refine how we experience things at a much more elemental level.

At some point we go "all in" and try to get to the bottom of the matter. We start seeing how things are neither completely real (solid) nor are they completely unreal (illusion). We use words like emptiness to talk about how things are vivid and apparent and yet can change in millisecond. We see the self this way too, vivid and changing, empty, and strive to get to the bottom of it. And SO MUCH clarity and wisdom and morality comes from being able to finely discern the operation of the self, it's creativity and it's paranoid defenses....

And yet part of us holds onto the idea that through practice "we can attend our own funeral". We think "I will get to the bottom of it" -- yet I is the bottom of it  We think "maybe practice will show me what I need to awaken", but we rarely notice the subject-object construct in that idea "practice shows me" -- what is practice? what is me? what will see it? what, exactly, will awaken?  But practice takes on a path of it's own, interesting driven by two of the last three fetters (pride and restlessness). Nothing wrong with that. It's good meditator development and practice.

But there is a very humbling and even deflating sense of seeing through the self at 4th. When pride and restlessness run themselves out, then the basic ignorance becomes apparent. It is ridiculous in retrospect. But it's also the end result of a LOT of investigation and development and refinement, which is inherently valuable, so there is not much disappointment after the odd shock of it wears off.

And there is nothing to show for it. It's a bit like climbing a mountain and then coming back to where you started and people wonder why you can't show them the mountain, why you think the mountain exists, and, anyway, why would you climb a mountain if you just wind up back here? ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6251086))

## Zen & Theravada attainments.

False Kensho is A&P, true Kensho is First Path (cessation), Satori comes much later as Fourth Path. It's that simple. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8631371))  

## When does the path chill out.

There really are no rules for this.  Some people have fairly straightforward journey to first path -- still challenging and with deep changes, but not disruptive. Some people become dark night yogis for a decade. In general, it seems like those who have faith in dharma/meditation seem to do better. Those with big insecurities and doubts and spiritual ambitions have trouble (like I did).  
  
Most people have fairly wild journey to second path, this is very common. New energetic stuff starts happening and jhanas become many times stronger, so it's very strange and in the midst it's hard to map. Some people really freak out. Other people think "ooh, cool!", so even the same experience gets interpreted differently. But some people oddly quit completely after first path, so they seem to have no problems, I guess. In any case, they are off the radar!   
  
The journey to third path is very similar to the journey to first path. It can be a time of deep refinement and really saintly development... or it can oddly become a kind of spiritual dark night that people never quite crawl out of. These tend to be the scary dogmatic teachers that obviously know a lot, but who are obviously still struggling... obvious to everyone except themselves. People who tend to be dogmatic or intellectual have a real problem with this stage because it is all about direct experience, not "applying techniques" or "manipulating experience". A playful and appreciative attitude for life and mind really helps. Kindness is essential.  
  
There aren't a lot of data points for fourth. This journey is hard to assess, because in this stage --- well, really during all of meditation, but it is very obvious at this stage because it is the "last" --- what becomes obvious is that each path insight is more like a "tipping point" rather a total and complete transformation. So some people seem to barely slip into a fourth path-ish realization and do no more work... and they tend to have ongoing challenges in life along with a fair amount of denial. They have stuff to clean up, but they refuse to see it. Others don't tip into fourth until they are nearly completely cleaned up and it seems like they are done done done. These people seem to be the ones that really struggled along the way. By the time they hit fourth, they are mostly cleaned up. Seems like there is everything thing in between, but like I said: not enough data.  
  
As you can tell, this isn't a dogmatic view, just one based on the limited number of people I've met and my own experiences. And it's worth what you paid for it. Overall, what really helps is a group of meditators that can help normalize the wierdness and challenges... otherwise, we're prone to thinking "I'm the only broken meditator that has to go through this", so a lot of pride and anxiety and negative psychology. Or we're prone to thinking "I'm the most awesome meditator in the world, no one has gone through this. I am the next spiritual avatar for all of humanity and all will bow to me!", so a lot of pride and manial and delusions of grandeur.  With the company/relationship with other meditators, you're more likely to say, "yup, that wierd stuff is happening to me too, it's kind of challenging but interesting and I'm learning a lot about my mind." ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/19460141)) 

## Spiritual Bypassing: meaning and suffering and humanity and emotion should not be negated, but recognized as legitimate within their domain.

Awakening does have an aspect of "oh, all experiences are fundamentally mind-nature" to it, but it doesn't then result in the conclusion "there is no value in discriminating the consequential nature of situation because it’s all good and all perfect". That would be a regression. Pretending that intelligence and wisdom doesn't exist is the root of a lot of spiritual bypassing and dysfunctional spiritual cults.  
  
… It's important not to confuse the domains of "the nature of experience" and value/use of concepts. So, concepts all have the same mind-nature (empty and vivid), but that doesn't mean that certain concepts are more appropriate/useful than others in certain conditions. There are better >uses< of the concept of meaninglessness or the concept of meaning, depending on context.   
  
… Awakening is everything you are seeing but it is >all in< (as in the card game poker: "I'm all in") into meaning and suffering and humanity and emotion.... and then coming out the other side. ("trans" in the post-trans fallacy sense.) On the other side, meaning and suffering and humanity and emotion are not negated, but recognized as legitimate within their domain.  
  
The reason I feel compelled to say this is that I have seen maybe 6 or so people on DhO, KennethFolkOnline, AwakeNetwork, etc. that have used similar language, said that they have cracked the code, everything is meaningless except some aspect of their philosophy (love, awareness, knowing, etc.) and then basically were in denial about actual human living was still impacting them with discomfort, suffering, loss, inadequacy, failure, dissatisfaction --- all the basic human stuff that everyone experiences.  
  
I just wanted to point out that if there is an idea that the mechanical precision and non-emotional, non-meaning aspect of the world is the truth, the whole truth, the answer to suffering, then you are not allowed to ever bring in any meaning or value that isn't found in the material world, especially not love, even if you try to sneak it in as a relaxed muscle. If materialism is IT, you have to stop at relaxed muscle (and not even use the word relaxed, because that is not a material expression, it would have to be something expressed about sarcomeres or something like that) and never mention the world love --- because as soon as you do, you are outside of materialism.  
  
And really, when it comes down to it, YOU are simply not meat. You are not meat.  
  
… When you see how human drama and suffering is fabricated, it is clear how pointless it is. But that doesn't mean there isn't any meaning or value or discrimination that represents wisdom and development. Quite the opposite. In fact, implicit in the argument is a sense of meaning and discrimination and wisdom. It's kind of funny when you think about it. Trying to argue for the greater truth of a pre-meaning world can only be done within the domain of a world that is dripping with meaning. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/8445176))

## Spiritual Materialism could be seen as a form of Hell.

I also agree that refinement continues post-awakening. It's not quite the refinement of a self, though, which I think is what pre-awakening refinement seems to be about. The point pre-awakening is clearly "perceptual shifts are happening to me, how can I get more of them and better versions of them?"

Awakening is the realization that this kind of spiritual materialism could be seen as a form of hell. Endlessly self-recursive, endlessly inadequate, because more and better is always theoretically possible. But what is this urge that wants more and better? Seems like this is the origin of suffering. Even the nobility of the pursuit of dharma can become samsara. This is a very third path dilemma.

"Practice" and "progress in practice" becomes very paradoxical after the pride of self is unknotted. It's the paradox of "the sun is shining but the snow isn't melted." The sun doesn't grow at this point, but the snow definitely melts. Perhaps what appears like effort is needed, perhaps not, either way it doesn't matter because dharma is both the sun and the snow, effort and no effort -- there isn't a conflict. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5715677))

## Dependent Origination: supernatural feeling vs conventional scientific materialism.

That “often times life events seemed tailored to fit where I've been in an insight cycle” is a big observation actually. Life and practice start blurring together... and there is a tautological aspect to it. Somehow the link between interior attitude/view seems to co-arise with external experience/meaning. "Is my life this way because I feel this way? Or do I feel this way because my life is this way?"

Quite honestly, this is the real heart of the idea of dependent origination. The introductory teaching of DO makes it sound like a chain of events, this cause that, which causes the next thing... but that's really just another way to talk about conventional scientific materialism. The deeper and much harder to grasp insight of dependent origination is that cause and effect seem to arise at the same time in the same mind moment. So this has a much more supernatural kind of feeling where inner meaning and out experience seem tightly linked --- and they are. It is very difficult to separate life events (and their interpreted meaning) and where we are internally (psychology and insight cycle).

This is also where the real heart of "rebirth in the 6 realms" idea comes in. In every moment, we seem to be born into a moment where we have a fundamental self-other relationship to reality, and this relationship is oddly tautological. We are explosively angry and what we notice are more things that make us explosively angry (hot hell realm). We are seething with hatred (cold hell realm) we just see more and more things that make us hate. (These two flavors of hell count as "the hell realm") Then there are those moments when we are greedy and addicted to getting more and what we notice are all the ways that maybe we could satisfy that unsatisfyable addition (hungry ghost realm). Sometimes we just want to live a formulaic life, not think too much and do what we've done, so all we see are the ways to repeat old patterns that worked in the past and kinda go on autopilot (animal realm). In the human realm, we have the ability to do more fine and precise evaluations, weight this against that, making reasoned judgements but at the core we are feeding our sense of desire, a kind of sophisticated human way of desiring, but fundamental desires that go away as soon as they are satisfied and then yet another desire comes along, on and on forever... or We are feeling jealous and notice all the things that people have and we want to compete or battle for it (jealous gods realm). Or we kinda feel like we're on top and we're right about everything and we most walk around with a sense of pride but secretly kinda wonder if things might change (the realm of the gods).

The main thing that separates Buddhism from almost every other religion/philosophy is this pointing out of the dependent arising of meaning. You could say, "the viewpoint in the moment is a bias and selects evidence in the moment that confirms the viewpoint". This how you say it in sort of scientific language. But through meditation practice, you can actually begin to see/feel how this actually happens in real time, which is VERY different that having the belief that this is how it works or intellectually looking backward and figuring out how this happened just a few moments ago.

With meditation practice you can see this happening as it is being done... and once you really see it, you realize how all these paradoxes are resolved, inner and outer, self and others, view and meanings, this and that, experience and observer of experience, etc. That means we have a very different relationship with sensations, urges, emotions, and thoughts. They are neither completely real, nor completely unreal. We see how they both are and are not. This is emptiness in a very deep sense and is pretty much the heart of the insights of later paths.

Another interesting point about the 6 realms idea: it's only in the human realm that the being can choose to meditate. All the other realms are too reactive. Hell beings are lost rage (angry tweets and biased "news" channels), Hungry Ghost chase their addictions (drugs and video games), Animals are stuck in a rut (eating the same breakfast every day, doing their commute, doing their standard workout, watching "their" TV show, going to bed at their normal time), Humans are chasing the next desire (bigger house, new car, more stylish clothes, new cookbooks and perhaps a better designed grill for making better barbeque), Asuras/Jealous Gods are busy expanding their doctor and lawyer practice and figuring out new investments that will put them in more rich and powerful circles and trying to get the promotion at work by outmaneuvering their competition. The Gods are busy isolating themselves in gated communities and protecting their assets and buying islands to hide at if the SHTF and trying to find ways to eat and shop and travel and watch sports in ringside or skybox seats so they don't have to deal with those annoying non-gods.

... but only humans can do the tricky move of desiring awakening and desiring a meditation practice! Basically using desire to see through desire. Very clever you humans!!  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/6989255))

## No-coordinate system experience.

It's really easy to hear the words "things are where they are, as they are" and "in the seen, only the seen" and hear it as a normal "this seeing that over there from here". But the extra effort of maintaining over here and over there is... extra.

But many times throughout the day -- maybe 10,000 times -- everyone will have experiences without a coordinate system... but we rarely recognize them. Usually it's only during sports, or sex, or eating, or meditation that the kind of no-coordinate system experience is noticed. But it's really just a matter of walking around and noticing how experience happens (and this is why walking meditation is as valuable as sitting meditation).

Once this starts becoming obvious, how many experiences happen without a coordinate system, then you can bring back even the coordinate system. A big spiritual mistake is to assume that anything that creates a sense of duality is wrong. But this is a very simplistic and ignorant view that can trap people. It's important to see that there is nothing wrong with having coordinates, but.... the assumption that there is a solid thing at the center of the coordinates that needs protecting, well that's the original ignorance, the origin of suffering. There is nothing solid at the center. And when you go to "look" for the solid thing, you've created a another coordinate system, which is fine, but there is nothing at the center of the new coordinate system that is trying to look at the center of the old coordinate system.

Noticing how the assumed coordinate system's center keeps moving can be another great meditation, sitting or walking. And you can key into how effortless life is when the coordinate system is allowed to go where it wants.

The assumption of self and the paranoia of needing to protect the self sort of lean against each other and if either are seen clearly for what it is, the whole thing collapses (the ridgepole breaks), the knot unties...

The main challenge is that when the sense of something solid in the center starts to weaken... a very subtle and primal fear will arise. Definitely. It's the fear of annihilation, death of the self. The practice will seem a bit wrong and dangerous. (Which is yet another experience with a coordinate system that has nothing at the center of the coordinates.) The main role of a teacher/mentor/guru at this stage is to help someone stay in this uncomfortable zone using various practices, but make sure they are challenging themselves and really feeling this very very subtle discomfort.  (And to warn them about the killer cows, a very important part of the sutta   ) And it's not like a meditator really needs to be forced or pushed by the teacher at this point, it's more like a non-verbal communication that it's okay to do practices that seem a bit wrong and dangerous, yet we are really interested in where it seems to be leading.

“Then, Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress.” [Link](https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/KN/Ud/ud1_10.html) ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/7259611))

## Non-dual vision has a sense of equal weighting of focus and peripheral.

When this happens the visual framing we normally use is gone and the sense of self becomes very vague. Normally we orient our sense of being an observer by identifying with focus or by identifying with wide-angle view. If the scene is focused then the scene is the subject and within our mind, we are the object. If the scene is being seen with wide-angle view, then it feels like we are an object within this scene, we are the subject. Don't try to think this through, just play with how the sense of self changes as you change views.

Normally we can't hold the unframed field of vision for long, we freak out, and it collapses into either wide view (with a weak sense of center) or a narrow view (with a strong sense of center).

So it takes some gentle repetition to kind of get used to "the edges of the view matter and the center of the view matters".

Most people are blown away by how panoramic it looks.

Another way to approach this is to "look at the space in the scene". To get a sense of space, imagine water filling up all the empty spaces in a scene (take your time, have fun with it, really imagine everything slowly becoming underwater, all the way up into the sky). Then look at that water and let it turn back into space. Look at that space. This is very helpful when you are in a boring or stressful situation, just tune into the space, nice simple space. ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/10385192))

## Frames of Reference when giving advice…

When giving advice I have a several frames of reference that I layer on top … just for fun, off the top of my head:  
  
-Style of attachment  
-Degree of personality disorder  
-Maturity of coping mechanisms  
-Developmental stage within Cook-Greuter's stages of ego development  
-Feeling of "fit" of current practice  
-Consistency of practice  
-Understanding that exploring current experience is "the point", i.e. look at problem itself, don't search for solutions  
-Balance of effort vs. allowing  
-Ñana within progress of insight  
-Ability to allow vipassana jhanas instead of normal "clarity"  
-Basic understanding of 6 realms (for gross orientation/corruption of sitting practice)  
-Ability to expand equanimity to all experiences, even vagueness and confusion  
  
:: First Path ::  
-Repeat of above, but including broader acceptance of confusion due to vipassana jhana/jhana  
-Eventually making distinctions between repeat ñanas/fruition of first path and the new territory of the road to 2nd path  
  
:: Second Path ::  
-Ability to let progress of insight slip into the background, yet still see it.  
-Ability to use off-cushion reactivity as practice, never not-practicing  
-Review of basic psychology attachment, repression, coping mechanisms - can't delay fixing anymore  
-Review of stages of ego-development... should be moving toward advanced stages - can't delay fixing anymore  
-Focus on tautological aspects of identity especially:  
  -Deep Understanding of six reams (identity based on basic motivation, in terms of 5 to 30 seconds of experience)  
  -Understanding of basics of 5 elements (primal reactive patterns, in terms of 1-2 second of experience)  
-Deep trust/allowing  
  
:: Third path ::  
-Ability to be honest about "there is still something left to figure out"  
-Ability to turn orientation to practice itself into a study/practice  
-Ability to do "no distraction, no control, no practice"/mahamudra/dzogchen  
-Very deep understanding of 5 elements (in terms of micro-seconds of experience)  
-Deep honesty/sensitivity  
  
:: Fourth path ::  
-And deep honesty post-Fourth  ([DhO](https://www.dharmaoverground.org/discussion/-/message_boards/message/15037688))