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Restricted Dzogchen Teachings, Part 2: Buddhahood Without Meditation

B. ALAN WALLACE

Lesson 7:
Quantum Physics, and Vajradhara's Cosmogony

Reading:
The Attention Revolution:
"Introduction," and "Directed Attention," pages 1-22

The Attention Revolution

UNLOCKING THE POWER OF THE FOCUSED MIND

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foreword by Daniel Goleman

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INTRODUCTION

Few things affect our lives more than our faculty of attention. If we can't focus our attention—due to either agitation or dullness—we can't do anything well. We can't study, listen, converse with others, work, play, or even sleep well when our attention is impaired. And for many of us, our attention is impaired much of the time.

People whose attention falls well below normal may be diagnosed with an attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and the most common treatment for this problem is with pharmaceuticals. The popularity of Ritalin and similar drugs has increased dramatically in recent years, and the United States manufactures and consumes five times more of such drugs than the rest of the world combined. The many detrimental side effects of ADHD drugs are deemed a small price to pay for suppressing the symptoms of attention disorders. This materialistic approach to treating ADHD is enormously profitable for the drug manufacturers, but it is profoundly disempowering for the individuals who become reliant on them. While our culture may proclaim "Just say no to drugs," when it comes to treating attention disorders, the message is "Go for the quick fix."

This is not to say that pharmaceuticals cannot be helpful in treating ADHD. They certainly can, as millions have discovered through their own experience. They may be essential at times, especially to combat severe symptoms. But they don't *cure* anything. They merely suppress symptoms while generating harmful side effects, and even if you don't become addicted, you may develop a psychic dependence on them—perhaps for life. Thus, in clinical cases, drugs can play an important role within the

context of a wider set of interventions. But the sooner we can get children, adolescents, and adults off their drug dependence and provide them with methods for maintaining attentional balance on their own, the better it will be.

Our faculty of attention affects us in countless ways. Our very perception of reality is tied closely to where we focus our attention. Only what we pay attention to seems real to us, whereas whatever we ignore—no matter how important it may be—seems to fade into insignificance. The American philosopher and pioneer of modern psychology William James summed up this point more than a century ago: "For the moment, what we attend to is reality."[1] Obviously, he wasn't suggesting that things become nonexistent when we ignore them; many things of which we are unaware exert powerful influences on our lives and the world as a whole. But by ignoring them, we are not including them in *our* reality. We do not really register them as existing at all.

Each of us chooses, by our ways of attending to things, the universe we inhabit and the people we encounter. But for most of us, this "choice" is unconscious, so it's not really a choice at all. When we think about who we are, we can't possibly remember all the things we've experienced, all the behaviors and qualities we have exhibited. What comes to mind when we ask "Who am I?" consists of those things we have been paying attention to over the years. The same goes for our impressions of other people. The reality that appears to us is not so much what's out there as it is those aspects of the world we have focused on.

Attention is always highly selective. If you consider yourself a materialist, chances are you attend primarily to physical objects and events. Anything nonphysical seems "immaterial" to you, in the sense that it doesn't really exist, except perhaps as a byproduct of matter and energy. But if you think of yourself as spiritual or religious, in all likelihood you have been attending to less tangible things. God, the soul, salvation, consciousness, love, free will, and purely spiritual causation may seem far more real to you than elementary particles and energy fields. I suggest that if you were able to focus your attention at will, you could actually choose the universe you appear to inhabit.

Attention also has a profound impact on character and ethical behavior. James felt that the capacity to voluntarily bring back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. Christian contemplatives have known for centuries that a wandering mind easily falls into temptation, leading to sin. And Buddhists have recognized that a mind prone to distraction easily succumbs to a myriad of mental afflictions, leading to all kinds of harmful behaviors. If we can direct our attention away from negative temptations, we stand a good chance of overcoming them.

James also asserted that geniuses of all kinds excel in their capacity for sustained voluntary attention. Just think of the greatest musicians, mathematicians, scientists, and philosophers throughout history—all of them, it seems, have had an extraordinary capacity to focus their attention with a high degree of clarity for long periods of time. A mind settled in such a state of alert equipoise is a fertile ground for the emergence of all kinds of original associations and insights. Might "genius" be a potential we all share—each of us with our own unique capacity for creativity, requiring only the power of sustained attention to unlock it? A focused mind can help bring the creative spark to the surface of consciousness. The mind constantly caught up in one distraction after another, on the other hand, may be forever removed from its creative potential. Clearly, if we were to enhance our faculty of attention, our lives would improve dramatically.

THE PLASTICITY OF ATTENTION

While countless studies have been conducted over the past century on various aspects of attention, remarkably little is known about the plasticity of attention, that is, the extent to which it can be enhanced with training. Given the enormous significance of attention in all aspects of life, this oversight is strange.

One of the reasons for the lack of research in this field may be due to a common assumption that the level of our attention is inflexible. William James wrote:

> The possession of such a steady faculty of attention is unquestionably a great boon. Those who have it can work more rapidly, and with less nervous wear and tear. I am inclined to think that no one who is without it naturally can by any amount of drill or discipline attain it in a very high degree. Its amount is probably a fixed characteristic of the individual.[2]

James recognized the enormous significance of the ability to voluntarily sustain one's attention on a chosen topic, declaring that an education that could effectively improve this faculty would be *the* education *par excellence*.[3] But he was at a loss when it came to providing practical directions for achieving this goal.

As long as our minds oscillate compulsively between agitation and dullness, wavering from one attentional imbalance to another, we may never discover the depths of human consciousness. Can the mind be irreversibly freed from its emotional afflictions, such as craving, hostility, depression, envy, and pride? Are there limits to our love and compassion? Is awareness finite and immutable? We know that the mind has powers of healing, which are sometimes attributed to the "placebo effect," and that it has the capacity to make us ill as well. What other powers lie dormant within human consciousness, and how can they be tapped? These questions have been posed by contemplatives throughout history, and focused attention has been a crucial tool in exploring them.

In the modern world we enjoy unprecedented access to many rich traditions of meditative inquiry. The Hindu and Buddhist traditions stemming from classical India have made uniquely refined advances in the field of attentional development. The methods of attentional training described in this book are drawn from this contemplative heritage and involve various kinds of meditation practice. And while the techniques explained here come from the Buddhist traditions of India and Tibet, they will be accessible and beneficial to anyone who engages in them, regardless of religious or ideological leanings. As with any skill, such as playing the piano or learning a sport, we can, through drills, repetition, and habituation over time, develop capacities presently beyond our reach.

No matter where you are starting from, you can benefit from training your attention. My goal in this book is to provide tools for enhancing attention to people no matter where they are on the spectrum of attentional development. At the basic level, these methods may be helpful for preventing and treating ADHD, which turns even mundane tasks into great hardships. For those with a higher initial capacity, the methods here can be used to maintain better attention in everyday life, and bring greater professional performance, physical health, and emotional well-being. Finally, this book contains methods for rigorously refining the faculty of attention to levels unimagined and unexplored in the modern world and will be of special value for contemplatives seeking to unlock the mysteries of the mind.

Especially in the advanced stages, this book sometimes delves into issues that presume either a background in or a proclivity for examining the doctrinal issues that underpin attentional training within a Buddhist context. Since I have written this book in part to address confusion among contemporary Buddhists about how the Buddha and later commentators taught shamatha and the practical implications of that confusion, non-Buddhist readers may find the discussions tangential to their concerns. You need not be a Buddhist to practice shamatha, and you should feel free to skip over these discussions. Nonetheless, you may profit by examining the divergences that have arisen over the 2,500-year history of this discipline.

TEN STAGES OF ATTENTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As a framework for the gradual development of attention, I have chosen the most complete and detailed description I have found in any contemplative literature—the ten stages described by the eighth-century Indian Buddhist contemplative Kamalashila in his classic work *Stages of Meditation*.

In a historic debate in Tibet, Kamalashila argued that the thorough purification of the mind requires training in three things: ethics, attention, and contemplative insight. Flashes of insight are valuable, but after the fleeting bliss of such meditative experiences, the dirty laundry of the mind still awaits cleaning. For that, contemplative insight must be supported by a high degree of attentional balance, and this requires systematic training.

This path is detailed with landmarks. By using Kamalashila's outline, we can know where we are, what we should be doing, and what to look for. The ten stages of attentional development are:

1. Directed attention
2. Continuous attention
3. Resurgent attention
4. Close attention
5. Tamed attention
6. Pacified attention
7. Fully pacified attention
8. Single-pointed attention
9. Attentional balance
10. Shamatha

These ten stages are sequential. The stages start with a mind that cannot focus for more than a few seconds and culminates in a state of sublime stability and vividness that can be sustained for hours. One progresses through each stage by rooting out progressively more subtle forms of the two obstacles: mental agitation and dullness. The successful accomplishment of each stage is determined by specific criteria and is accompanied by a clear sign.

THREE TECHNIQUES

To guide meditators along these ten stages, I have chosen from Buddhist teachings three techniques that I have found effective for people in the modern world. These three techniques are the basis for the three divisions of this book. For the first four stages, you should practice whatever method you find easiest. By stage five, the mind is relatively stable, and you can move on to subtler techniques.

For achieving the first four stages, I recommend the practice of *mindfulness of breathing*, variations of which can be found in Zen, Vipassana, and Tibetan Buddhism. Mindfulness of breathing means settling your

awareness on the sensations involved in breathing, continually returning your attention there whenever your mind wanders.

Beginning with the fifth stage, I recommend a method called *settling the mind in its natural state*. In this technique, you direct your attention to mental experiences, all the events—thoughts, mental images, and emotions—that arise in the domain of the mind. This method is drawn from the *Dzogchen*, or "Great Perfection" lineage, but is found in other Buddhist traditions as well.

With the instructions for the eighth attentional stage onward, we move on to the still subtler practice of maintaining awareness of awareness itself. The technique is called *shamatha without an object*. Here the practice is not so much one of *developing* attentional stability and vividness as it is of *discovering* the stillness and luminosity inherent in awareness itself.

The training in mindfulness of breathing may be helpful to anyone, including those seeking to prevent or treat attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders. Many people find the second practice, that of settling the mind in its natural state, to be more challenging, but some meditators take to it naturally. Likewise, the practice of awareness of awareness is subtler still, but it may be optimal from the beginning for those who are strongly drawn to it.

You may use any one of the three methods to progress along all ten stages of attentional development, or you may follow the sequence described in this book. How fast you progress will depend on the level of your commitment and the degree to which your lifestyle and environment support such practice.

INTERLUDES

Interspersed with my explanations of the ten stages, I have inserted "interludes," ancillary practices that complement the training in attention. After the explanation for each of the first four stages, I have inserted an interlude on cultivating one of four qualities of the heart: *loving-kindness*, *compassion*, *empathetic joy*, and *equanimity*. These practices are especially helpful for balancing our emotions and for opening our hearts. If we know how to work intelligently with our emotions, we can avoid many obstacles that might otherwise hinder our pursuit of focused attention.

Interspersed with the explanations of stages five through nine are interludes on the daytime and nighttime practices of lucid dreaming (drawn from modern scientific research) and of dream yoga (stemming from Tibetan Buddhism). These practices are designed to enhance mindfulness throughout the day and the night, for if our focused attention were limited to the time we spent in formal meditation, the benefit would be minimal.

One of the greatest benefits of a powerful faculty of attention is that it gives us the ability to successfully cultivate other positive qualities. With the powerful tool of focused attention, we can uproot formerly intractable bad habits, such as addictive behaviors or harmful thoughts and emotions. We can use it to develop an openhearted stance toward others and, on that basis, experience profound insights into the nature of the mind and of reality, radically altering our relation to the rest of the world.

GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

Most people would find their lives greatly enhanced just by attaining stage two of the ten stages. This level of development takes some effort, but it can be achieved by people who are living a busy life with career and family commitments as long as they are willing to set aside some time for meditation. It can dramatically improve the quality of everything you do and make you more resilient in the face of emotional and physical stressors. If that is your goal, there is no problem with using the techniques in this book for that purpose.

However, as noted above, this book is also a guide for people who wish to go well beyond what are considered normal levels of attention. For most people, achieving stage three will require a greater commitment than an hour or two spent each day in meditation in the midst of an active life. The more advanced stages of attentional development are accessible to people who dedicate themselves to weeks or months of rigorous practice in a conducive environment. Progress beyond the fourth attentional stage requires a vocational commitment to this training, which may involve full-time practice for months or years at a stretch.

If you traverse the ten stages of attentional development discussed in this book, the benefits are truly immense. Upon reaching the ninth stage, your mind is finely honed, freed from even the subtlest imbalances. At this point, it is said that you can focus effortlessly and unwaveringly upon your chosen object for at least four hours. At the beginning of this training, meditators are traditionally encouraged to practice for sessions of twenty-four minutes, which is one-sixtieth of a full day and night. At the culmination of this training, you should be able to sustain attention with unprecedented clarity for ten times that long.

According to Tibetan oral tradition, among meditators who are well qualified to embark on this discipline, those of sharpest faculties may be able to achieve all ten stages within three months; those with "medium" faculties may take six months; and those with "dull" faculties may require nine months. Such estimates assume that the meditators are living in a contemplative environment and devoting themselves day and night to this discipline. The reference to sharp, medium, and dull faculties pertains to the level of talent and attentional balance individuals bring to this training. Just as some people are naturally gifted musicians, athletes, and mathematicians, so are some gifted with exceptional degrees of attentional stability and vividness, which gives them a head start in this practice. Others may have an extraordinary level of enthusiasm and dedication to this training, and that will serve them well through the long months of hard work that it entails.

This level of professional training may seem daunting and unfeasible to most readers of this book, but compare it to the training of Olympic athletes. Only a small number of individuals have the time, ability, and inclination to devote themselves to such training, which can appear at first glance to have little relevance for the diverse practical problems facing humanity today. But research on serious athletes has yielded many valuable insights concerning diet, exercise, and human motivation that are relevant to the general public. While the training of Olympic athletes is focused primarily on achieving physical excellence, this attentional training is concerned with achieving optimal levels of attentional performance.

Once the ninth level has been achieved, the meditator is ripe for an extraordinary breakthrough, entailing a radical shift in one's nervous system

and a fundamental shift of consciousness. One is now poised to achieve shamatha: one's mind is now marvelously serviceable, capable of being used in a myriad of ways, and one's body also is endowed with an unprecedented degree of suppleness and buoyancy. It is a remarkable achievement, unlike anything one has ever experienced before.

Since the time of the Buddha, when people have asked Buddhist adepts about the nature of their practice, they have commonly answered, "Come and see!" In 1992, neuroscientists studying the effects of advanced meditative practice among Tibetan retreatants explained how they wanted to examine the neural and behavioral effects of meditation. One of the monks responded, "If you really want to understand the effects of meditation, I'll be glad to teach you. Only through your own firsthand experience will you truly know the effects of such practice."

Let's now begin working on the first stage, using the technique of mindfulness of breathing.

STAGE 1: DIRECTED ATTENTION

The first of the nine stages leading to the achievement of shamatha is called *directed attention*. The sign of having reached this stage is simply being able to place your mind on your chosen object of meditation for even a second or two. If you are trying to direct your attention to a difficult object, such as a complex visualization, this may take days or weeks to accomplish. But if your chosen object is your breathing, you may achieve this stage on your first attempt.

The faculty of *mindfulness* is crucial in shamatha practice. Mindfulness in this context differs somewhat from the way some contemporary meditation teachers present it. Vipassana teachers, for instance, commonly explain mindfulness as a moment-to-moment, nonjudgmental awareness of whatever arises. In the context of shamatha, however, *mindfulness* refers to attending continuously to a familiar object, without forgetfulness or distraction.

The first stage of directed attention is achieved by the power of hearing. According to Buddhist tradition, the most effective way to acquire fresh learning is directly from an experienced, knowledgeable teacher. First you hear teachings, then you follow up with reading, study, and practice. The *power of hearing* refers both to listening to instructions and also to reading about them, especially if no qualified teacher is available.

One of the first signs of progress in shamatha practice is simply noticing how chaotic our minds are. We try to remain attentive, but we swiftly "lose our minds," and slip into absentmindedness. People who never sit quietly and try to focus their minds may remain under the illusion that their minds are calm and collected. Only when we try to direct the

attention to a single object for minutes on end does it really become apparent how turbulent and fragmented our attention is. From a Buddhist perspective, the untrained mind is afflicted with attention deficits and hyperactivity; it is dysfunctional.

Like a wild elephant, the untamed mind can inflict enormous damage on ourselves and those around us. In addition to oscillating between an attention deficit (when we're passive) and hyperactivity (when we're active), the normal, untrained mind compulsively disgorges a toxic stream of wandering thoughts, then latches on to them obsessively, carried away by one story after another. Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders and obsessive/compulsive disorders are not confined to those who are diagnosed as mentally ill; the normal mind is prone to such imbalances, and that's why normal people experience so much mental distress! Such disturbances are symptoms of an unbalanced mind.

These two dysfunctional tendencies seem to be intrinsic to the mind. Hyperactivity is characterized by excitation, agitation, and distraction, while an attention deficit is characterized by laxity, dullness, and lethargy. When our minds are subject to these two imbalances, we have little control over what happens in our minds. We may believe in free will, but we can hardly be called "free" if we can't direct our own attention. No philosopher or cognitive scientist needs to inform us that our behavior isn't always guided by free will—it becomes obvious as soon as we try to hold our attention on a chosen object.

Thus our practice of mindfulness of breathing consists of prolonging our awareness of our breath. While this requires an alert mind, such concentration should not be tense but rather balanced. When we discover that we have become distracted from the meditation object, it may feel natural to clamp down more forcefully, tightly concentrating the mind. You can see this in the facial expressions of people who try to concentrate in this way: their lips become pursed, their eyebrows draw together, and their foreheads become furled with wrinkles. They're becoming concentrated, but like orange juice—most of the fluidity is being drained from their minds! If you want to concentrate for a short time and don't mind the side effects of

tension and fatigue, you can follow the above strategy. But if you want to follow the path of shamatha, you'll need an alternative.

I had to discover this fact through experience. During my first extended shamatha retreat, I was filled with enthusiasm. I wanted to take full advantage of the rare opportunity that was before me, for I was meditating in India under the guidance of the Dalai Lama! I had no financial worries, and my material needs were easily met. All I had to do was put the instructions into practice. I threw myself into this training with all my might.

Each morning I would rise at 3:30, except once when I slept in until 3:45 and got upset with myself for slacking off. Enthusiastic I was, but so uptight! The Tibetan manuals on shamatha meditation that I had studied over the years stated that the type of attention needed when one began such practice was "highly focused," so I tried as hard as I could to keep my mind from wandering. Within a matter of a few weeks, devoting many hours each day to meditation, I could sustain my attention on my chosen object for up to half an hour. I was elated to be making such fast progress.

As the weeks went by, however, I found myself becoming more and more fatigued. I was draining myself both physically and mentally, my joy in the practice was diminishing accordingly, and I felt my attention was not developing any further. What was wrong? I was trying too hard. The cultivation of shamatha involves balancing the mind, and that includes balancing the effort exerted in the practice with relaxation.

I think this points to a cultural difference between traditional Tibetans living in the highlands of Tibet and modern people leading fast-paced lives, their senses constantly bombarded by telephones, e-mail, the media, and noise. Years of such existence condition the nervous system and mind in ways that might have been considered torture in rural Tibet. One traditional Tibetan doctor whom I know once commented on people living in the West, "From the perspective of Tibetan medicine, you are all suffering from nervous disorders. But given how ill you are, you are coping remarkably well!" Whether we dwell in Boston, Buenos Aires, Berlin, or Beijing, our minds are conditioned to be more high-strung and engaged in compulsive thinking than the minds of Tibetan nomads and farmers living a century ago. So when Tibetan meditation manuals advise beginners to focus their

attention firmly, the instructions are aimed at a very different reader than the average city-dweller in the twenty-first century. Before we can develop attentional stability, we first need to learn to relax.

The meditation instruction that follows incorporates the practice of relaxation along with the instruction on mindfulness of breathing.

THE PRACTICE: MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING WITH RELAXATION

Our minds are bound up with our bodies, so we need to incorporate our bodies into meditative practice. In each session we will do this by first settling the body in its natural state, while imbued with three qualities: relaxation, stillness, and vigilance.

The Posture

It is generally preferable to practice meditation sitting on a cushion with your legs crossed. But if that is uncomfortable, you may either sit on a chair or lie down in the supine position (on your back), your head resting on a pillow. Whatever position you assume, let your back be straight, and settle your body with a sense of relaxation and ease. Your eyes may be closed, hooded (partially closed), or open, as you wish. My own preference when practicing mindfulness of breathing is to close my eyes partially, with just a little light coming in, and I like to meditate in a softly lit room. Wear loose, comfortable clothing that doesn't restrict your waist or abdomen.

If you are sitting, you may rest your hands on your knees or in your lap. Your head may be slightly inclined or directed straight ahead, and your tongue may lightly touch your palate. Now bring your awareness to the tactile sensations throughout your body, from the soles of your feet up to the crown of your head. Note the sensations in your shoulders and neck, and if you detect any tightness there, release it. Likewise, be aware of the muscles of your face—your jaws, temples, and forehead, as well as your eyes—and soften any area that feels constricted. Let your face relax like that of a sleeping baby, and set your entire body at ease.

Throughout this session, keep as physically still as you can. Avoid all unnecessary movement, such as scratching and fidgeting. You will find that the stillness of the body helps to settle the mind.

If you are sitting, assume a "posture of vigilance": Slightly raise your sternum so that when you inhale, you feel the sensations of the respiration naturally go to your belly, which expands during the in-breath and retracts during the out-breath. During meditation sessions, breathe as if you were pouring water into a pot, filling it from the bottom up. When the breath is shallow, only the belly will expand. In the course of a deeper inhalation, first the abdomen, then the diaphragm will then expand, and when you inhale yet more deeply, the chest will finally expand after the belly and diaphragm have done so.

If you are meditating in the supine position, position yourself so that you can mentally draw a straight line from the point between your heels, to your navel, and to your chin. Let your feet fall to the outside, and stretch your arms out about thirty degrees from your torso, with your palms facing up. Rest your head on a pillow. You may find it helpful to place a cushion under your knees to help relax the back. Vigilance in the supine position is mostly psychological, an attitude that regards this position as a formal meditation posture, and not simply as rest.

The Practice

Be at ease. Be still. Be vigilant. These three qualities of the body are to be maintained throughout all meditation sessions. Once you have settled your body with these three qualities, take three slow, gentle, deep breaths, breathing in and out through the nostrils. Let your awareness permeate your entire body as you do so, noting any sensations that arise in relation to the respiration. Luxuriate in these breaths, as if you were receiving a gentle massage from within.

Now settle your respiration in its natural flow. Continue breathing through your nostrils, noting the sensations of the respiration wherever they arise within your body. Observe the entire course of each in- and out-breath, noting whether it is long or short, deep or shallow, slow or fast. Don't impose any rhythm on your breathing. Attend closely to the

respiration, but without willfully influencing it in any way. Don't even prefer one kind of a breath over another, and don't assume that rhythmic breathing is necessarily better than irregular breathing. Let the body breathe as if you were fast asleep, but mindfully vigilant.

Thoughts are bound to arise involuntarily, and your attention may also be pulled away by noises and other stimuli from your environment. When you note that you have become distracted, instead of tightening up and forcing your attention back to the breath, simply let go of these thoughts and distractions. Especially with each out-breath, relax your body, release extraneous thoughts, and happily let your attention settle back into the body. When you see that your mind has wandered, don't get upset. Just be happy that you've noticed the distraction, and gently return to the breath.

Again and again, counteract the agitation and turbulence of the mind by relaxing more deeply, not by contracting your body or mind. If any tension builds up in your shoulders, face, or eyes, release it. With each exhalation, release involuntary thoughts as if they were dry leaves blown away by a soft breeze. Relax deeply through the entire course of the exhalation, and continue to relax as the next breath flows in effortlessly like the tide. Breathe so effortlessly that you feel as if your body were being breathed by your environment.

Continue practicing for one twenty-four-minute period, then mindfully emerge from meditation and reengage with the world around you.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PRACTICE

The above, guided meditation on mindfulness of breathing is based on the Buddha's primary discourse on this topic. Here is an excerpt from the Buddha's explanation:

> Breathing in long, one knows, "I breathe in long." Breathing out long, one knows, "I breathe out long." Breathing in short, one knows, "I breathe in short." Breathing out short, one knows, "I breathe out short." One trains thus: "I shall breathe in, experiencing the whole body. I shall breathe out, experiencing the

> whole body. I shall breathe in, soothing the domain of the body. I shall breathe out, soothing the composite of the body."[4]

As I noted above, in this practice you don't try to regulate the breath in any way; you simply note the duration of each in- and out-breath. In most Theravada commentaries on this discourse, the phrase "experiencing the whole body" is interpreted as referring to the whole body of the breath, that is, the full course of each inhalation and exhalation. Certainly this is a goal of this practice, but there is also value in observing the sensations of the breath throughout the whole body as well.

This is a "field approach" to training the attention. Instead of pinpointing the attention on a mental image, a prayer, a mantra, or a specific region of the body, open your awareness to the entire field of sensations throughout the body, especially those related to respiration. The emphasis here is on mental and physical relaxation. If you constrict your mind and your body, shamatha training will aggravate the tension you already have. By settling your awareness in the body, you diffuse the knots in the body and mind. Tightness unravels of its own accord, and this soothes the network of the body.

Mindfulness of breathing is universally emphasized for those who are especially prone to compulsive thinking. As the fifth-century Buddhist master Asanga comments, "If involuntary thoughts particularly dominate your behavior, then focus the mind in mindfulness of the exhalation and inhalation of the breath."[5] Since nearly everyone living in the modern world is coping with an overload of thinking, remembering, and planning, this may be just what the doctor ordered: a general prescription for soothing and healing overworked bodies and minds.

Although Buddhism generally encourages cross-legged meditation, the Buddha encouraged his followers to practice in any of four postures: walking, standing, sitting, and lying down.[6] Any of these positions is perfectly suitable. Not everyone living in the modern world has the same type of mind or nervous system. If you tend toward excitation, you may find lying down especially helpful for releasing the tightness and restlessness of your body and mind. But if you are more prone to laxity, you may simply fall

asleep whenever you lie down, so it may be necessary for you to be upright when meditating.

Lying down can also be very useful for meditation if you're physically tired but not yet ready for bed. In this case, you may not be able to rouse yourself to sit upright in a posture of vigilance, but the prospect of lying down for a while may be inviting. Surrender to your body's need to rest, and use the supine position to calm the mind as well. This likely will be much more refreshing and soothing than watching television or reading a newspaper. The supine posture may be your only option if you are ill, injured, or frail. It may be especially useful for meditation by those in hospitals, senior care facilities, and hospices.

Mindfulness of breathing is great for preparing your mind for mental training, but it can also help you fall asleep. If you suffer from insomnia, the above method can help release tension in your body and mind when you go to bed at night. And if you wake up in the middle of the night and have a hard time falling back asleep, mindfulness of breathing can help you disengage from the thoughts that flood the mind. According to recent studies, about 80 percent of Americans are chronically sleep deprived. So even if all this practice does is help you catch up on your sleep, that's worth a good deal.

AN ATTENTIVE WAY OF LIFE

We are all aware of the way the body heals itself. Physicians don't heal abrasions, and surgeons don't mend bone fractures. Instead, they do whatever they can to allow the body to heal itself—by keeping the wound clean, setting the broken bone, and so on. These are so common that it's easy to lose sight of the extraordinary nature of the body's own healing power.

Normally, when we observe something we *can* control, we *do* try to modify it in some way. But mindfulness of breathing involves letting the breath flow in and out with as little interference as possible. We have to start by assuming the body knows how to breathe better than the mind does. Just as the body knows best how to heal a wound or a broken bone, it also knows best how to breathe. Trust your body. You will likely find

that sustained awareness of the breath, free of interference from emotional and attentional vacillations, soothes both the body and the mind. You can observe the healing process taking place before your very eyes.

Mindfulness is useful for overcoming physical and mental imbalances produced by a stressful, wound-up way of life, but you also can use mindfulness to help prevent such imbalances in the first place. Environmentalists talk about "cleaning up after the elephant": the endless task cleaning up industrial contamination, and how a far more effective strategy is to avoid fouling up the environment in the first place. Likewise, mindfulness of breathing can be used to prevent the contamination of our inner environment. It helps us tether the elephant of the mind, and avoid the imbalances that so frequently come with modern living.

The healing of the body-mind has another significant parallel with environmentalist ideas. When a stream is polluted, one may try to add antidotes to the toxins in the water, hoping such additives will neutralize the damage. But the more straightforward and sensible approach is simply to stop the flow of contamination into the stream. When this is done, over time the flow of the water through soil, stones, and vegetation can purify the stream completely. In the same way, rather than adopting any special breathing technique, you simply stop disturbing your respiration with disruptive thoughts and emotions. Before long, you will find that the healthy flow of the breath is restored naturally.

According to Buddhism and other contemplative traditions, mental imbalances are closely related to the body, and especially the breath. Whether we are calm or upset, the breath reacts swiftly. Conversely, irregularities in the breathing also affect our emotional states. During the course of the day, our minds get caught up in a stream of often disturbing thoughts, plans, memories, and concerns. The next time you get angry or sad, elated or surprised, note the rhythm of your respiration. Check it out, too, when you're hard at work, concentrating on the task at hand, or caught in a traffic jam. Compare those breathing patterns with your respiration when you're calmly sitting at home, listening to music or watching a sunset.

When we are dreaming, all kinds of mental processes continue, even though our bodies and physical senses are dormant. Our emotional

responses to dreams are just as real, and have the same impact on the body and the breath, as our emotions when we are wide awake. The only break we have from such sensory and mental input is when we are in deep, dreamless sleep. It's then that the respiration can flow without disruptive influences from the mind. I believe this is the healthiest breathing that occurs for most of us throughout the day and night. At the end of the day, we may fall asleep exhausted, but then eight hours later, we wake up, fresh and ready for a new day. All too often, this turns out to be just one more day of throwing our bodies and minds out of balance.

We now have the opportunity to break this habit. We don't have to wait until we're asleep before respiration can heal the day's damage. With mindfulness of breathing, we can do it anytime. Not controlling the breath, we let the respiration flow as effortlessly as possible, allowing the body to restore its balance in its own way.

Simply focusing your attention on the sensations of the breath is directed attention, the first stage of this practice. You have achieved the first stage once you are able to sustain your attention on the breath for even a few seconds. When pursued earnestly, a little mindfulness meditation in the morning or at night immediately brings greater clarity to all activities and provides a natural check on unhealthy habits.

But even if you find this practice helpful, it may be difficult to find time each day to devote yourself to such attentional training. Creating time to balance your mind requires a measure of loving-kindness for yourself. Thus, to be able to make choices that are truly conducive to your well-being, as opposed to merely providing pleasurable sensations, you may first need to cultivate loving-kindness.