

Meditation: What, Why and How

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What is Meditation and Why Meditate?

If you heard or read the piece on worldviews that preceded this you may recall that at the end, a nondual perspective was discussed. Also discussed was the necessity of an experiential understanding of the underlying unity of such a worldview to fully *grok* it. The principle avenue for that experiential understanding was meditation. Thus, this is an elaboration on the previous piece.

Introduction

I have studied and practiced meditation for about fifteen years. On the basis of that background, I think meditation can be divided into at least three categories. First, there is what I would call natural meditation. Natural meditation is not done with intent and is a relaxed state of awareness that one may fall into for any number of reasons. One example is a state that one might enter as a result of a solitary encounter with the beauty and tranquility of nature. The second category I call traditional, because it is grounded in a meditative tradition such as Buddhism or Hindu philosophies such as Vedanta or Tantra. Traditional meditation may take many forms and is always done with intent. The third category I would call medicalized. This is a form of meditation that has been adapted from a traditional meditation and employed for health reasons. An example of this type is the Benson Relaxation Response, which is a relabeled form of basic mindfulness meditation. It was first introduced by a Harvard cardiologist, Herbert Benson, several decades ago as a technique to help reduce stress in his patients. This discussion of meditation will be based on the traditional approach.

What is Meditation?

Meditation is a technique to improve the quality of your attention, which determines what you are aware of. The root meaning of the word that “attention” is derived from means "to grasp." Thus, attention is making sensory contact with a physical stimulus or introspective contact with a mental stimulus and holding on to it. To improve attention requires that you have the self-discipline to practice the technique of meditation consistently and persistently. Meditation can also be useful for revealing the cognitive structures of mind such as ideologies or belief systems and automatic programs (APs) that use such structures to render judgments for you.

Here is an anecdote about attention. Dean Radin, head of research for IONS, had

an experiment that he wanted to conduct that required participants who could maintain their focus of attention for a minimum of thirty seconds without exception. He tested a large number of volunteers to identify those who would be suitable for his experiment. He found that the vast majority of those tested could maintain a focus of attention, on average, for six seconds. He did find the subjects he needed and it may be no surprise that they were all experienced meditators.

What is the purpose of improved attention?

While there may be several ends to which enhanced attention might be directed, in meditation it is to make a state of *presence* more easily attained. Presence, as the late Ram Dass is noted for saying, is, “Be here now.” This means that you are focused on the present moment, not on the past, not on the future, not on your personal narratives (or stories) and not on other narratives (or stories).

Two teachers who put an emphasis on presence are Richard Moss, a former ER physician, and Leonard Jacobson, a former attorney. Moss offers his students an exercise employing a circle. He suggests thinking of yourself standing in the middle of the circle, which represents the present, the portion behind you represents the past, the portion in front of you represents the future, the portion to your left represents your personal stories and the portion to the right of you represents other stories. He says that any time you find your attention outside of the circle, bring it back to the center of the circle and the present. Jacobson similarly suggests that you should keep your focus on what’s in front of you, that is, be present with actuality. He believes that most of us most of the time are divorced from the actual and are “lost in our minds.” Both would agree that the mind is a useful tool and has an important role to play in our lives, and both would agree that we spend a great deal of time engaged with the mind when it is unnecessary.

Why is it important to be present?

To begin with it is only through being present that you can truly experience life. Life is grounded in experience not in the labyrinth of your mind. Life is a process that unfolds through your experience of what is present. When you are lost in your mind you are missing out on life.

Presence also is important to becoming non-judgmental, an attitude discussed in the post preceding this one. You may recall that being non-judgmental requires that you approach people and situations as unique and come to a determination about

them through discernment grounded in what is present, not on ideologies and beliefs that create generalized categories in your mind. When you respond to someone as if they were a representative of a mental category, you are dehumanizing them and treating them as an object. You can often recognize this process because the category frequently has a demeaning label.

Presence can also reveal things to you about your conditioned mind and its biases, what was called automatic programs in the previous post. Automatic programs will often be the first thing that attempt to arise and take over your response to someone or some situation. This is an excellent opportunity to take note of this automatic program, suspend it and try to identify its source. Once you know where it is coming from you will be better able to manage it rather than be managed by it.

What is the role of the brain?

The answer to this question is influenced by the work of Iain McGilchrist and Jill Taylor, both of whom are neuroscientists.

The brain is divided into two hemispheres. McGilchrist's hypothesis about how evolutionarily the split brain came to be adopted by many life forms is related to two tasks of great importance in the past and today, especially in non-human animals. Those tasks include the need for particularized attention for seeking and obtaining food and generalized attention to monitor the larger environment for danger, such as predators. This reminds me of an illustrative story about generalized or inclusive attention. This was related by an anthropologist studying some indigenous people living in a jungle environment. The anthropologist was with a group on some sort of expedition into the jungle. When they reached a certain spot, one of the natives came and led him to a clear spot and told him they would wait here and the others would be back for them. He asked, "why do I have to wait here?" The native replied, "white men don't know how to see." The anthropologist asked, "see what?" The native answered, "danger." These indigenous people clearly didn't think much of Europeans' right hemisphere functioning.

Briefly, the left side tends to exclusive attention. It is very good at bringing single objects of consciousness into its "grasp" and cognitively dismantling and manipulating them. This is often referred to as reductive thinking, i.e., reducing things to their apparent parts. Linear logic is then applied to understanding the relations among the parts. Understanding gained from this process has been very useful, especially in learning about many physical processes, and in the

development of technology. However, this great asset provided by the left side must be overseen by the right side if good order is to be maintained in overall brain functioning.

Indeed, McGilchrist argues that from an evolutionary perspective, the right side of the brain is designed to be the master while the left side of the brain is designed to be its servant. He illustrates the importance of this relationship by discussing the effects seen in his patients with right hemisphere impairment due to strokes, trauma and disease. The effect of such impairment on the functioning of these patients, he indicates, is very similar to what he sees in his patients with schizophrenia. The effects are generally not so severe when the reverse occurs, suggesting that the right can do without the left much better than the left can do without the right hemisphere.

The right hemisphere tends to inclusive attention and processes input from the left side and its own intuitive understanding through integral thinking that creates an overall synthesis. Such a synthesis weaves a picture that renders an understanding of reality that far exceeds what the left side can accomplish on its own. The right side is also generally reckoned to be the source of imagination, which is largely responsible for using the synthesis to make creative leaps.

It is also worth noting that the most common patterns of electrical activity in the brain, the so called brain waves, seem to have some association with the hemispheres. Beta activity is likely to be more often dominant when the left hemisphere is dominant. Alpha activity is likely to be more often dominant when the right hemisphere is dominant. Alpha is associated with a more relaxed and fluid state of functioning than beta. It better supports the right hemisphere's need for a more holistic mind set. Theta is also more likely to be dominant in the right side, especially when imagination and creativity are in process. Both alpha and theta are associated with meditative states and indicate that meditation is a useful tool for relaxation, inclusive attention, a holistic mind set and Presence.

Returning to the left hemisphere, when beta is dominant and the left hemisphere is inattentive, a network known as the *default mode network* (DMN) becomes active. The DMN is thought to support and maintain the ego narrative that most of us rely upon to explain our thoughts, emotions and behavior. One way it does this is to bring into awareness various memories and emotional associations to those memories that are tied to our personal narratives, causing rehearsal of and commentary on the narratives. The DMN also brings forward into awareness similar stimuli associated with other narratives important to ego. These stimuli are

processed in much the same manner and for similar purposes. New meditators often find themselves less attentive and still in a beta-dominant mode, which presents them with a hurdle. The activation of the DMN while attempting to move into a meditative state often creates a significant distraction -- a state sometimes described as Monkey Mind Syndrome. This syndrome has probably thwarted the intentions of more would-be meditators than anything else. If the new meditator will relax, persist and not become judgmental about his or her difficulties, they can be overcome. Success will not only improve the quality of attention and facilitate states of Presence but can also alter brain structure and improve the brain's neuroplasticity.

Taylor and McGilchrist both take the view that the materialistic worldview common in western thought and becoming increasingly more common worldwide leads to a left-brain fixation. The processes of the left hemisphere are praised and encouraged and generally put forward as the pinnacle of human thinking while dismissing or minimizing right hemisphere processes and functions. McGilchrist, especially, appears to be of the opinion that this fixation could very well undermine civilization and lead to its collapse. Taylor, if nothing else, is an advocate for restoring whole brain functioning as a way to heal many of our personal and societal ills.

How does meditation help you become Present?

Meditation helps you become Present in several ways. First, the deep relaxation that accompanies meditation activates the right hemisphere. Second, holistic or inclusive attention activates the right hemisphere. Finally, meditation suppresses the activity of the default mode network, which reduces left-hemisphere activation. All mental stimuli, especially language, activate the left hemisphere and bring attention to bear on specific stimuli, which become objects of consciousness. Presence and dominance of the right hemisphere make consciousness without an object possible. This means that a state of awareness can be attained in which there is no attention focused on a particular stimulus. Both music and language are auditory stimuli. Music, however, can be useful for some people during meditation if it is calm and soothing music that aids relaxation and contains no lyrics. Lyrics often draw attention to themselves in the same way that speech does and become objects of consciousness in an activated left hemisphere.

Does meditation give you psychic powers or other unusual experiences?

Patanjali, a venerated yoga teacher, from about 400 BCE, taught that if psychic

phenomena appear during meditation, they should be considered as distractions and ignored. Note that there are several branches of yoga practice and this reference to yoga is not to the Westernized version of Hatha Yoga commonly practiced in the U.S.

More likely to occur are *noetic* events. Noetic events are often associated with the late Edgar Mitchell who, on his return trip from the moon, had an unusual and profound experience while gazing out a window at the vastness of the universe. After he was back on earth, he began researching the experience that he had and concluded that it was a noetic event. A noetic event is defined as an intuitive and implicit understanding or subjective knowing of something. Noetic events are also characterized by being ineffable or difficult to verbally and meaningfully describe to others, unless they have had some similar experience themselves. Edgar Mitchell went on to found an organization known today as IONS (Institute on Noetic Science) whose mission is to study noetic events. Noetic events can arise in both natural and traditional meditative states.

What is the best meditation technique?

There are many styles of meditation that have developed within various traditions. Which one is best for you depends what is most comfortable for you and can be the basis of a sustainable practice. I use what I call a sensory-field meditation technique that I've arrived at from my study and practice of meditation. I am happy to share my process with anyone who has a serious interest.

What is enlightenment?

In the piece that preceded this one, it was noted that some traditions view human functioning along a dimension that runs from ignorance to enlightenment. Ignorance is seen as being ignorant of one's divine nature, and enlightenment is coming to know one's divine nature directly, i.e. through experience. A contemporary nondual teacher, Rupert Spira, prefers to replace the word "Enlightenment" with the word "Truth," which functionally still carries the same meaning as just given. However, Spira prefers it because it doesn't have as much conceptual baggage as the term "Enlightenment."

Here is what enlightenment won't do for you. It won't turn you into a zombie. It won't render you unable to deal with the daily world, and it won't solve all of your problems, though it may give you a different perspective on them. There is a Zen saying that I think is apropos when talking about enlightenment. It goes like this:

“Before enlightenment chop wood and carry water, after enlightenment chop wood and carry water.” Those seeking the spectacular are usually disappointed. If you’re one of those people looking for something spectacular from enlightenment, you might want to contemplate this Zen saying on a regular basis.

There is a Western connection to the idea of enlightenment through Abraham Maslow and Carl Jung. Both considered transcendence of the ego self to be important. Such a shift they found produced a shift in perspective and a broadened worldview. Both thought this shift was a shift away from the ego or self and to a more authentic *Self*. Maslow says the shift is the culmination of a developmental process, and Jung says it is the result of *individuation* or the integration of the unconscious, subconscious and ego consciousness.

Transcendence of the self, from my understanding, puts one on the cusp of enlightenment. Some traditions use a six-phase model when talking about the process of moving from ignorance to truth (enlightenment). The first phase is the unconditioned mind (infants and pre-verbal children) with no sense of self. The second phase is the conditioned mind (most everyone else), which is the phase where one is acquiring and has acquired a hierarchy of concepts and a process for processing and judging people and circumstances through those concepts. It also is the period where a lot of automatic programs are established that lead to decisions that require little thought. The third phase is often referred to as “I AM.” It is a phase in which one throws off much of the conditioning acquired during phase two. In this phase, one has acquired Presence and learned to use discernment rather than judgment. I have written about this phase calling it the [*natural mind*](#).

When one transitions from the natural mind, the cusp is crossed and one enters the fourth phase, which is the first phase of enlightenment. This phase is called Self-realization. It can be described as the direct experience of one’s true nature (a manifestation of divinity). The fifth phase is often called God-consciousness and can be described as direct experience of unconditional acceptance by Source consciousness (God, if you prefer). Unconditional acceptance and Divine Love are often considered to be interchangeable. The sixth phase can be referred to as Unity-consciousness and described as the experience of being unconditional acceptance. This can also be thought of as an identity with Source. Jill Taylor thinks that the right hemisphere *anterior cingulate* is the gateway to experience of Source.

Note: Be careful not to conflate human love with Divine Love. The former is an emotional state and the latter is a way of *being*. Human love is thought to be elicited, whereas Divine Love is not elicited but emitted or, if you prefer, radiated.

Guide to Sensory Field Meditation

This guide is a follow up on the essay [Meditation, What Is It and Why Do It](#).

The Basics

Before undertaking a meditation practice, you need to make a firm commitment to fully engage the practice and accept it as a long-term process or change in lifestyle. This is what the philosopher Ken Wilbur calls *Stepping Up*, which is the first step in a four step-process he recommends (see link below title).

First, you want to sit in a comfortable chair but not one so comfortable that it will lull you to sleep. Put both feet on the floor and find a comfortable position for your hands. Personally, I cup my hands one on top of the other and let them rest between my legs with wrists on the top of my thighs.

Second, you can either meditate with your eyes closed, which is probably best for beginners, or open. However, if you wish to keep your eyes open, I suggest that you pick a point of focus for your vision that is not interesting in any way, such as an area on the floor a few feet in front of you or a blank spot on the wall that you are facing.

Third, you should use diaphragmatic breathing. This means that when you breathe in, you pull the air all the way down into depths of your lungs. This will cause your stomach to expand outwards. This won't make you look fat, and it will subside when you exhale. This is how you should breathe all the time. If you don't, you are what is called a shallow breather, and you're getting about half of the potential oxygen available to you on each breath. If you pay attention to the air flow in and out of your nostrils, you will note that the air is warmer on the inhale than on the exhale. This is due to the warming effect of your lungs on the air inhaled.

Fourth, you should breathe rhythmically. Try to breathe in a slow steady rhythm. The longer you meditate the slower your breath cycle should become. Breath will be explored further in Step Nine.

Fifth, you are now ready to begin. At first you should focus your attention on your breathing. As your attention moves to a bodily process and away from external events, you may begin to have spontaneous arising of mental stimuli such as thoughts, emotions or memories. Try not to bring your attention to focus on these

objects of consciousness and let them follow their own path of arising and subsiding. If you do get seduced into attending to one of them, just shift your attention back to your breathing. Don't criticize or judge yourself. Just follow your process. The same directions should be followed for any external stimulus that attracts your attention and becomes an object of consciousness.

You can either simply start and stop when you feel like you're ready to end the session. On the other hand, you can approach your session in a more systematic way. Pick a specific amount of time that you think would be a comfortable starting point and set a timer. As you become settled into the time frame you've started with, expand it by five minutes or so. Continue this process until you've reached an optimal length for your sessions. Some teachers suggest twenty minutes, some thirty minutes and some forty-five minutes to an hour. Some recommend once per day and others twice per day. Personally, my sessions are typically not timed, run somewhere in the thirty to forty-five minute range and are usually done twice per day except on days when circumstances just won't permit it. I would advise trying to get to twenty minutes per day sooner rather than later and lengthen your sessions or increase their frequency as you feel the need to do so.

Sixth, your objective when meditating is to avoid focusing your attention on any specific external (physical) or internal (cognitive) stimulus. If you're meditating with your eyes closed, you have temporarily controlled for one major source of external stimuli. The most likely external stimuli that might arise while your eyes are closed are sounds or odors. However, if your eyes are open this would be the most prominent source of external stimuli. There are two primary controls for attention. One is intentional, that is, you deliberately direct your attention to some stimulus or stimulus complex. This is what you are doing when you do *Sensory Field Meditation* (SFM). You are intentionally directing your attention to a stimulus field or complex stimulus. The second is reflex, that is, your attention is drawn to a stimulus by the emotional valence the stimulus holds for you. For example, you are meditating and a dog starts barking at something, perhaps a squirrel or a passing car. If your attention to the SF is well developed, your focus on the SF will simply include the barks as an undifferentiated stimulus within the field. If your focus is broken and your attention is drawn instead to the barking, the barking holds a strong emotional valence for you. What you need to do is calmly accept that your focus has been broken and, without self-judgment, intentionally redirect your attention back to the SF and relax. The goal should be to counter, with relaxation, your emotional reactivity to the barking. If this comes easily then no further action is needed other than working on holding your focus and not reacting.

However, this experience may contain a message. You may have just been made aware of an *automatic program* (AP) that needs to be addressed. While you are meditating is not the time to try to address it. However, it is good material for contemplation. What you know from the experience is 1) you have an AP that was strong enough to take control of your attention; 2) you know that barking is a trigger for activating this AP; 3) you know that the stimulus has a strong emotional valence for you, otherwise it wouldn't take control of your attention. Upon reflection, following meditation, the reason why the barking elicited reflexive attention from you may be immediately apparent. If not, you are ready to move on to a method for discovering the reason why the barking elicited reflexive attention from you.

You have what you need to move into a formal discovery process. You have two of the components for an A-B-C analysis. There is one antecedent (A), the barking. There are two consequences (C): a) an emotional consequence (aggravation, anger, fear) and b) a behavioral consequence, which is reflexive attention to the antecedent (distraction, attentional refocus) [see **Note** below]. What you are missing is the belief (B) about the antecedent (A) that resulted in the two consequences (C). What you want to do is focus on this incomplete sequence with an emphasis on the missing component (B) through contemplation, which is very similar to meditation with one important difference. You get into a meditative state, which includes being very relaxed. Next, place your attention on the A-B-C sequence, while gently holding a question in mind; e.g., what is my subconscious belief about barking that gives it emotional valence? Just sit with it and let whatever arises come into awareness. Make a mental note about anything that arises and seems worth further consideration, especially if it elicits an emotional reaction. This can take multiple sessions to get to the relevant information. When you have one or more thoughts or images that seem relevant, you can shift your contemplation focus to those thoughts or images. Eventually, with patience, you will come to an understanding of what the B is in the sequence and probably its origins.

Hypothetically, let's say that you discovered that, as a young child, you had a fearful encounter with an aggressive dog whose behavior included a lot of barking directed at you. From this experience you came to believe that all dogs or maybe only all barking dogs are dangerous. This belief may have been subconscious, i.e., outside of normal awareness ever since the encounter that generated it. In any case, you now have a good idea what the belief (B) is about barking (A) that results in your response(s) (C).

Sometimes this information (insight) alone will diminish the response. However, it must diminish it sufficiently that the A (antecedent) no longer results in C (consequence) while you are meditating with intentional focus on the SF. If this is not the case, you will need to do counter-conditioning exercises. This is simple enough to do with the example used above. Counter-conditioning requires that two incompatible responses are paired. The most common neutralizing response used for negative emotions is relaxation. It is nearly impossible to be both relaxed and fearful, frightened, anxious, angry, frustrated, and so on at the same time.

Fortunately, you are learning a process (meditation) that can, with practice, bring about a deep state of relaxation. So, find or make a recording of one or more dogs barking. Get into a highly relaxed meditative state and activate the recording. If the recording elicits reflexive attention and you can't easily resume your intentional attention to the SF, turn it off, get relaxed and activate the recording again. Continue until your attention can be easily redirected to the SF or reflexive attention isn't being elicited. If you can return your attention to the SF, continue to maintain your focus on the SF, continue to relax and if possible deepen your state of relaxation all while the recording continues. Do this until you no longer have any difficulty maintaining your focus on the SF. This process can be adapted to any number of automatic programs that meditation may bring into your awareness. This process is, at least in part, what the philosopher Ken Wilbur means by *Cleaning Up*, which is the second step in a four-step process.

Note: Of the two types of consequences (emotional and behavioral), you may often get an emotional response without a behavioral response. Both emotional and behavioral responses can be either physical or cognitive and often exhibit both aspects. The emotional response is the motivation for a behavioral response. Sometimes the emotional response isn't sufficient to produce a behavioral response. At other times you suppress a behavioral response because you have stronger conditioning against responding and your response to the emotional response (now an A) results in suppression (C), which may have an emotional component such as frustration. This is an overlap and potentially is information suggesting the need for an extended analysis.

You may get two types of internal or cognitive stimuli: 1) random thoughts or images that subside or fade away on their own or 2) potent thoughts or images that seduce you into unpacking them. The second type may be alerting you to an AP that needs to become the target of contemplation, using the A-B-C sequence described above.

If you have a lot of type 1 cognitive stimuli and the sheer number of them is interfering with you being able to maintain your focus on the SF (monkey mind syndrome), you need some way to reduce their frequency. I have three suggestions. You can simply begin counting your breaths as a distraction. Count an inhale as one and an exhale as two and so on. Continue until you reach ten and then start over. You can also label them. I have sometimes just labeled whatever was arising in awareness as "chatter" (a.k.a. self-talk). You can also label them as to source, such as "memory," "my story," "imagination," "other story" or "commentary." The idea is to label the event and then move back into silence to the best of your ability. If you can simply observe stimuli arise and subside, while maintaining your focus on the SF, then you don't need to take any special measures. The stimuli will diminish in number with patience. The key thing in following this SFM practice is not getting caught up in what is arising and turning it into an object of consciousness. A silent mind isn't easy to find and will be your greatest challenge in meditation. Do not judge yourself. Do not think of yourself as failing. Do not chastise yourself. All this does is inflate the importance of what you're trying to diminish.

Moving up on the spiral

You will reach a point where you've settled into the above basic process and are comfortable with it. This does not mean that you've completely mastered it and achieved perfection. Just that you have reached a point where you can handle more steps. This could take as little as a few days to many weeks. If after reading steps seven and eight, you think you can do this in a single operation, go ahead and give it a try. If you find you are having problems integrating the SF into a gestalt, come back and work through steps seven and eight in a gradual and systematic way.

Seventh, in this step you begin enlarging your *sensory field* (SF). The SF is what is occupying your awareness. When I say "occupy your awareness," think of cutting your fingernails. When you are doing this task, the focus of your attention is on the clippers in one hand and one of your nails on the other hand. This is what is occupying your awareness. You may be incidentally aware of other stimuli but the focus in your SF is the nail-cutting task.

Currently you have your breathing in much the same state of awareness as your clippers and nails in the example above. This may also include what your passive vision is registering, if you started out doing eyes-open meditation. It will also include cognitive stimuli arising into awareness and then subsiding.

What you want to do now is include in your SF all internal bodily sensations and sensations arising from the body's contact with objects such as the floor where your feet are resting and the chair that you are sitting in and contacting with various parts of your body. One method of scanning in these sensations is to begin with putting your attention on your feet. Hold awareness of your breathing in your SF and then bring the feet and floor into the SF. Next, slowly scan into the SF the lower legs and knees. When you have your breathing and your feet, floor, lower legs and knees together in the SF, move on up your body, slowly scanning in your upper legs, buttocks, abdomen and lower back, chest and upper back, shoulders, your left arm and hand, your right arm and hand, your neck, and last, your head and face. You should now just hold the expanded SF in awareness as a gestalt, with no focused attention on anything else, though you may be incidentally aware of other stimuli.

Work with the expanded SF for a while and try to keep your mind as quiet as possible. Total silence is a worthy goal but one difficult to achieve. Just try not to let your attention be seduced by mental stimuli that arise in awareness and turning them into objects of consciousness. If you don't focus on them they will pass. To the extent that you are focused on the SF, as if it were a holistic or single stimulus instead of stray mental stimuli, you are Present. Work with this for a while until you feel like you're doing a good but not perfect job of being Present with the SF.

Eighth, You are now ready to include the last few stimuli, other than visual, in the SF. Hold the SF in awareness and expand the SF to include all auditory stimuli, olfactory stimuli and any tastes that might be present. The SF should now have pretty much all of your sensory stimuli coalesced into a single stimulus - a gestalt. Your awareness should be as completely filled with this gestalt as possible. Think of sitting in a relaxed state and looking at a scene in nature, a painting or photo of a complex scene. You are not looking at items within the scene but at the scene itself, the gestalt of stimuli that comprise the scene. As long as you don't allow your attention to be drawn to some individual stimulus in the gestalt, you are Present with the scene. Once you have your SF expanded as described, you may want to stay with this for weeks or months.

Ninth, when you feel like you are ready take up the ninth turn of the spiral, what you want to do is get your breathing to as slow a pace as you are comfortable with. Some experienced meditators can get down to one or two breaths per minute. Personally, I have managed two breaths per minute but feel more comfortable with three or four. However, I'm probably handicapped by all the years that I smoked. I

find the best way to handle this is to first slow the pace of your breathing as much as is comfortable. You can then extend this by pausing your breathing at the end of the inhale and at the end of the exhale. If it works better for you, just pause on either the inhale or the exhale. Personally, I find it more comfortable to do this at the end of an exhale, but you may be different. Reducing the amount of oxygen entering your lungs and thereby your brain will dampen the default mode network (DMN).

Tenth, in this phase the goal will be to further reduce the random mental stimuli, e.g., memories, associated emotions, rehearsal of your story, anticipations about the future and commentary on other stories. These are a problem if they haven't been controlled by the methods described earlier in the Sixth topic. Further, they do not include things that appear to be related to APs and need to be addressed through contemplation, as described earlier in the Sixth topic. If both these criteria are met, you might apply one or both of the following approaches to reducing them.

One thing that might help is a finding in a recent research study that found the *frontoparietal network* (FPN) plays an important role in the ability to purge thoughts or “clear your mind.” One of the things that the FPN is very much involved in is *sustained attention*. So, as you work to improve your quality of attention, you also improve your ability to clear your mind of thoughts and strengthen the FPN.

To begin, you need to create a definition that you think will encompass all of the mental stimuli that you've observed arising. A simple technique for “clearing your mind” that is based on the research mentioned above is to simply apply a self-instruction to the effect that “this thought is unnecessary. Forget it.”

Another technique you can apply using your definition is counting and plotting. This technique has been shown to effectively diminish a wide variety of behaviors-thought is a mental behavior - through the operation of intention and feedback.

To implement this you want to begin counting each stimulus that arises according to your definition. If it appears you haven't included everything that you observe, then revise your definition. You can keep count using your fingers but this could become a distraction, especially once you pass a count of ten. Personally, I used a handheld counter that would silently add a count to the total each time I depressed a button on the counter. I simply cupped this in one hand during meditation and used my thumb to press the button. All sorts of counters can be bought at sporting goods stores and on sites like Amazon. Further, you should graph your count for

each session. This will provide you with visual feedback on how active your DMN is being. You can use a piece of graph paper or do it in a spreadsheet, which was my choice. Do this until you've brought the spontaneous arising of mental stimuli down to as low a level as you can. Once you've sort of hit "bottom" and the count is staying pretty constant, you can probably stop this practice and only do it occasionally for monitoring purposes.

Eleventh, you are now ready to include visual stimuli in your SF. If you started out doing eyes-open meditation, you can skip this turn of the spiral, if you've done all of it already. First, you want to start opening your eyes during your meditation sessions. As I suggested earlier, for those who wanted to begin with their eyes open, pick an area on the floor a few feet in front of you or a blank spot on a wall to gaze at. In either case, you will also be aware of some peripheral visual stimuli, which is fine. Second, you want to bring these visual stimuli into the SF so that they too are a part of the gestalt that fills your awareness. Be careful not to get seduced by any of the stimuli represented in the field or gestalt. However, if you do find yourself drawn into focusing on some element of the field, just bring your focus back to the field or gestalt. Be gentle with yourself about slippage. Don't concern yourself about it. Just pull yourself back toward full Presence with the field.

By this time or possibly earlier, you should find that, at least some of the time, the SF has subsided into the background and Presence with your awareness (not what you're aware of) has come to the foreground. Some would describe this as "*being aware of being aware*;" others might say simply "*beingness*." To reach this phase you will have to have significantly reduced or, for all practical purposes, stopped spontaneous arising of mental stimuli into awareness.

Twelfth, you can now start thinking about moving from a passive, sitting practice to a more active, moving practice. Some start doing this through a formal walking meditation. All you do in this practice is to keep your focus on the sensory field but stand up and start walking slowly about while keeping your visual focus on the ground. This is usually done on a fixed path such as a circle, square or a labyrinth. For those who have done the walking meditation for a while and feel ready to expand their practice, you might take up Tai Chi or other form of moving meditation. Remember, during movement practice, you should keep your focus on your SF, which includes your entire body, which is doing the movement.

For those who want to move on and take their practice into the world and don't feel a need for the more formal step(s), begin doing an active meditation practice

whenever an opportunity presents itself in your daily life. You can do this briefly while engaged in any type of mindless activity that doesn't require that you have to think about what you're doing. You can do this while washing the dishes, cutting the grass, walking or jogging. Two of my favorites are while standing in a checkout line or driving on a road that doesn't require active driving. In the end, you want to simply bring a state of Presence into most of your day. When you do have to drop into a narrow object of consciousness mode, try to bring presence to the task just as you bring Presence to the SF that usually fills your awareness.

Upon reaching this phase, you've gone about as far as you can go in preparing yourself for a deeper phase. You are in the *natural-mind* phase. So, relax and just be. If you move into deeper phases, they will come when they come. They arrive by grace. They just take you. Many nondual teachers see three phases beyond the natural mind. They are Void Consciousness, God Consciousness and Unity Consciousness. For a little more about these, see the last question in my essay *What Is Meditation and Why Meditate*. This question was not covered in the oral presentation done at Mountain Light due to time constraints.

Questions or constructive comments are welcome: [David](#)