

## 12

## Calming the Mind

The mind is fickle and flighty,  
It flies after fancies wherever it likes;  
It is difficult to restrain.  
But it is a great good to control the mind;  
A mind self-controlled is a source of great joy.

*The Dhammapada 35*

**B**efore we embark on a discussion of Buddhist meditation let's do a very simple exercise. Pick up a small object (a pencil, pen, cup – anything) with your hand, look at it and put it away. Then close your eyes and for the next ten minutes try to focus your attention on the mental image of that object. For timing, use a clock or wristwatch alarm or go by your internal alarm (feel). Whenever you stray away from that image try to bring back your concentration to the object.

What is the most striking thing that we notice during the exercise? It is that the mind does not stay focused on the object. It wanders as it fancies – to sounds, bodily pains, other thoughts and so on. It is like a constantly rebellious and hyperactive child. Except for the small minority amongst us who have become accomplished meditators, this nature of wandering about is the way of the untrained mind. This is a universal human problem. The mind jumps from thought to thought because by habit that is what it knows, and likes, to do. The purpose behind *Calming Meditation* is to tame this discursive mind, gently guiding it to focus its attention on one object and eventually make that a habit. Thus, Calming Meditation may be looked upon as a method of breaking a bad, or unhealthy, habit (of a wandering mind) and replacing it with a good habit (of a focused mind).

Calming Meditation capitalizes on the scientific fact that the mind cannot think of two things at the same time (that is during the same 'thought moment'). So when we induce the mind to think of a neutral object such as the breath, then during each thought moment of that thinking process it cannot think of other things which agitate it.

Through repetition of that process, when we succeed in guiding the mind to concentrate on one thing at the exclusion of all else, for a reasonable length of time, the net effect is calming of the mind. The tranquility (calmness) realized will be in stark contrast to the usual state of the mind resulting from its habitual discursiveness. Of course, a calmed mind leads to the calming of many bodily activities (such as lowering the blood pressure) and calming one's entire life rhythm, contributing to better overall health. Note that concentration (on the chosen object) is the practice; calmness is the result.

Buddhist meditation comprises two types, *Calming Meditation*, which as we have seen develops calmness through concentration and *Insight Meditation*, which enables one to perceive things without distortion ('see things as they are'). For optimum effectiveness, Insight Meditation needs a mind that is calm, a mind that has been prepared by Calming Meditation. Thus Calming Meditation is a prerequisite for effective Insight Meditation, if one is to realize the best results with the latter. Insight Meditation will be discussed in some detail in the next two chapters.

The objects of focus available for Calming Meditation practice are many. We will use our natural breath as the object and restrict our discussion and practice to that, to keep things simple. The breath is one of the most popular objects of meditation. The scriptures tell us that the Buddha himself used it the night of his enlightenment. The main advantage to using the breath is its natural (guaranteed) availability twenty-four hours a day for a lifetime, so that one does not have to depend on externals for objects of meditation. Another advantage is that it may also be used as a model and a 'home base' for Insight practice.

Calming Meditation carried out with the breath as the object of focus is called Breathing Meditation (*anapanasati*<sup>46</sup> in Pali, *sati* meaning mindfulness and *ana* and *apana* meaning inhalation and exhalation respectively). So strictly speaking, Breathing Meditation is mindfulness (Insight practice) of breathing. However, it is common practice to use the term *anapanasati* when referring to breathing meditation, whether it is used for Calming Meditation or for Insight practice.

<sup>46</sup> We will render the Pali term *Anapanasati* as Breathing Meditation in English.

We can get a good idea of what we are trying to achieve with Calming Meditation if we go back to the analogy<sup>47</sup> of the six rambunctious kids who were driving their mother crazy (Chapter 7: Our Sensory World) and extend that analogy a bit. An immediate consequence for the mother is that it is simply impossible for her to concentrate on helping the eldest child prepare for a school test. Now let's say, after dinner the mother puts the kids, starting from the youngest, to bed one by one, except for the eldest. As each child goes to sleep, the home atmosphere becomes more peaceful and the mother's situation improves proportionately. Once the fifth child has retired for the night, the mother is able to focus (concentrate) on helping the eldest. Her own anxiety gradually diminishes as she concentrates on helping the child and she is completely calm by the time she finishes helping.

The mother is analogous to the mind and the six children to the six senses. In Calming Meditation what we try to do is 'put to sleep' five of the six senses and focus our attention on just one activity associated with the sixth – the sense that is 'awake'. In the case of breathing meditation, the sense that is awake is the sense of touch. So our focus is the sense (or sensation) of the breath *touching* the nostrils.

The procedure for the Breathing Meditation is as follows:

- Sit comfortably in the cross-legged position (if you are comfortable with this posture) or simply in a chair with hands cupped and resting on the lap. Keep the back straight with the chin drawn in slightly. Breathe normally and close the eyes.
- With awareness note the in-breath and out-breath as they pass through the tip of the nostrils, as a security guard watches people entering and leaving a building through the main door. Do not follow the breath into the body or out of the body.
- Each time the mind is distracted by a thought, simply acknowledge that (with no aversion or craving) and gently come back to the anchor, that is the breath at the tip of the nostrils. Do this with patience however many times necessary.
- Practice for ten minutes the first day and very gradually increase the duration to a maximum of one hour (usually considered to be an optimal duration for one sitting). The increase in duration is determined by your own estimation of how comfortable you feel with the progress.

<sup>47</sup> Another useful analogy to get a feel for the combined effect of the six senses on the mind is to compare the former to wind and the mind to a tree full of leaves. When there is no wind, the leaves are still (calm), therefore the tree is calm. When there is wind, the leaves are agitated.

That is all there is to the essentials of Calming Meditation practice. Now we will cover some noteworthy points of clarification regarding this practice.

1. *Distractions.* The mind *is* going to wander into other thoughts. That is the nature of the untrained mind and that is also the very reason why we have undertaken Calming Meditation practice. So we must accept the discursiveness of the mind and after acknowledging the distraction, gently return to the breath. In accepting its wandering nature, we are for the first time beginning to understand the nature of our own mind, which is a great step in itself. It may help the meditator to mentally note any negative distractions such as "physical pain" or "mental (emotional) distress" and any feelings of joy as "joy" and get back to the breath. After the meditator has acquired some mastery over the practice, this supplementary aid of labeling could be eliminated.
2. *Counting.* Counting the breath could help the beginning meditator to better stay focused on the breath. There are many ways of counting, but for our present purpose the following is suggested. Count the first breath as "one, one". That is, "one" at in-breathing, "one" at out-breathing. Count the second breath as "two, two", the third breath as "three, three" and so on up to "ten, ten". Do not count beyond "ten, ten" as the attention then tends to get diverted to numbers rather than the breath; instead start all over again at "one, one". A very effective alternative to counting is to use the word "Buddho". Use "Bud" at in-breathing and "dho" at out-breathing.
3. *Absorptions.* When the concentration becomes sufficiently deep, the meditator may notice a sign (*nimitta* in Pali) arising, as a mental image. This may take the form of a puff of smoke, a cloud, an image of the Buddha, a gentle touch of breeze or some other form indicative of peacefulness. The arising of this mental image is an indication that the meditator has reached the stage of calmness called 'neighborhood concentration' (*upacara-samadhi* in Pali). This stage is the entry 'door' leading to two paths, one of which must be chosen by the meditator at this point. One path leads to various higher stages of 'absorptions' or ecstatic trances (*jhanas* in Pali), intensifying the tranquility realized so far – this path<sup>48</sup> is really continuation of Calming Meditation. The

<sup>48</sup> Those interested in pursuing the subject of *jhanas* may consult the book *The Jhanas in Theravada Buddhist Meditation* by Mahathera Henepola Gunaratna (Wheel Publication No. 351/353, Buddhist Publication Society, 1988)

trances will enable the meditator to enjoy spiritual ‘highs’ which are *transient*. However, they will not take the person one step closer to liberation from existential distress. The other path is Insight meditation, which alone is the way to deliverance from existential distress. Our interest, in the context of this book, is the Insight route, discussed in the next two chapters.

So, what have we gained by doing Calming Meditation up to the point of ‘neighborhood concentration’? Two things:

- (1) We have brought some degree of calmness to an otherwise agitated mind, so we can proceed to perform the function of rational thinking required in Insight Meditation, and
- (2) Though not directly relating to Insight practice, we have developed a skill that can be called upon any time to calm the mind whenever it becomes restless and confused in conducting the ‘business’ of daily living. This means Calming Meditation can be used for temporary relief of distress, while developing the skill of Insight Meditation for lasting relief.

It is important to bear in mind at this stage that Calming Meditation is a desirable preparatory base for Insight Meditation, but is *not mandatory*. Calming Meditation makes the practice of Insight so much easier. Yet, one can practice Insight Meditation without Calming Meditation, but will find it so much harder. It is like climbing a mountain (in warm weather). One can climb with or without shoes, but proper shoes will certainly make the climb much easier.

Also note that for our purpose of using Calming Meditation as a preparatory base for Insight Meditation, it is not essential that we see a *nimitta*, but if we *feel* an unusually good sense of peacefulness without seeing things, that is good enough.

4. *Place and time of day.* It helps to select a place that is quiet, as Calming Meditation is an exercise in concentration. The ideal is a quiet room where you are the only occupant. When this is not possible, meditating in a group is fine, so long as everyone maintains silence. With experience and proficiency, the meditator will be able to practice even within noise and common distractions. Silence is very important for beginning meditators. With regard to

time of day, it is best to allocate a specific time for Calming Meditation practice and adhere to that time slot daily, so that meditation practice becomes part of one’s routine like dinner.

5. *Effort.* The effort applied in Calming Meditation is mental only and minimal. All the effort needed is to gently bring the thinking (concentration) back from a discursive thought to the breath at the tip of the nostrils. This is where Calming Meditation primarily differs from *Pranayama* of Yoga practice, where physical effort is applied to the breath and respiratory system to alter the characteristics of one’s breath. In *Breathing Meditation* we use the breath itself as is.
6. *Results.* Since meditation is an art in ‘going with the flow’, one must not expect anything from the practice. The only rule for successful meditation is: start and continue. If you look for results and do not find them, you will get restless and defeat the purpose of the exercise. Don’t look for tranquility. When the time is up, tranquility will come as a reward for your doing your part with consistency and dedication. Remember that the initial part of any significant change is allowing the body and mind to get used to a new habit. The mind has been used to running amok all the time to this point, and now we are trying to teach it to stay still and focus on just one thing. It is like learning to drive a standard car after being used to driving an automatic or learning touch typing after being used to one-finger typing. It takes time to change any habit and the same principle applies to changing the behavior of the mind from discursiveness to calmness.
7. *Duration.* Do not be concerned as to the number of minutes you have been able to focus on the breath. Each single thought-moment you are able to focus on the breath is a moment of peace for the mind. So go by the smaller thought-moments, not minutes. So, as far as progress goes, every attempt at meditation by a meditator contains many thought-moments of success, which are not measurable with a clock, but still comprise success.
8. *Comparison.* Finally, do not compare your performance with that of others. Meditation is unique to the individual because each mind is unique. There is no competition or comparison in meditation. When you reach enlightenment, only you will know because it all happens inside *your* mind.

Chapter Insights and Highlights

- 1) It is in the nature of our untrained minds to wander about restlessly.
- 2) The objective of Calming Meditation (Pali: *Samatha*) is to tame the restless mind.
- 3) The calming effect is realized by focusing the mind on one object using only one of the six senses so the mind is not open to the other five senses. The sensory traffic to the mind being vastly reduced, the mind becomes calm.
- 4) The most popular object of focus is our natural breath. This particular form of Calming Meditation is called Breathing Meditation (Pali: *Anapanasati*).
- 5) Calming Meditation is used to calm the mind as preparation for Insight Meditation.
- 6) An additional use of Calming Meditation is as a *temporary* relief for distress. (Insight Meditation provides *lasting* relief for distress).