

GOING DEEPER MEDITATION MORNING

METTA BHAVANA

BHAVANA

Bhavana means cultivation and development. It's about the play of intention and experience, and bringing a sensitive awareness to and engagement with that.

BALANCED EFFORT

Balanced effort is something we bring in not to fix the attention on the object of focus, but in order to come to a greater understanding of the 'lean' or draw/pull of the mind away from that object by coming in to relationship with it, and so getting a feel for the weight/heft of it

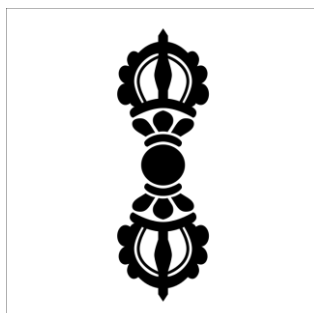
1) BALANCING LEAN/TENDENCY TO DISTRACTION WITH AN INTENTION TO RETURN

Here we are leaning back in to the practice, just sufficiently to balance the lean towards distraction.



The experience of a directionality of mind (cetana) leaning away from the practice is balanced with an intention that leans back in to the practice. There is a resulting balance of intention and experience which allows for a more immediate feel for the cetana. This is experiencing the mind. The quality of balance in the way of engagement with our current state of mind allows for a sensitivity to its unique experiential texture or signature.

This is different to the quality of balance in which the mind is settled in the practice with no lean away from it – illustrated by the vajra balanced upright – but as hindrances are resolved it settles back in to it.



2) MEETING RESISTANCE WITH A GENTLE PRESSURE

An alternative approach to balanced effort to meet and encountered resistance with a gentle pressure. Taking a cushion as a metaphor for an encountered resistance, if we do not engage with this at all, but just notice it, this is akin to the lightest touch on the surface of the cushion. We only get an impression of the surface of it – not of how solid it is. Conversely, if we give the cushion a squeeze, we find out how much give there is: how pliant and malleable this state of mind is.

We're doing this not to crush or squeeze away an experience we don't want to have, but to engage with, explore, and understand it. A getting a feel for the quality of mind we're in, taking an interest. Again, this is experiencing the mind.

BALANCED EFFORT IN THE METTA BHAVANA

With the metta bhavana the centre of the practice or object of attention is more subtle than with the mindfulness of breathing. In the mindfulness of breathing the object is the experience of the body breathing, and the lean back in to the practice is an intention to centre the attention on this physical tactile experience of the body breathing.

With the metta bhavana the centre of the practice is not a tangible tactile sensation. It's more a quality of relationship. The natural human capacity we have to be present with one another – most easily with our friends – bringing a kindly awareness to whatever is there, not trying to manipulate or fix anything. The basic move in the metta bhavana meditation, particularly in the first stage, is from being caught up in, preoccupied or troubled by what is on our mind to being with it. Bringing this natural human capacity we have to be with one another to bear and being with whatever is on our mind. This is a turning towards not the content of what is preoccupying or troubling us, but the experience of how it is to be preoccupied or troubled. Bringing a quality of relatedness and taking an interest.

This is self metta. It has no particular location, being more a kindly quality in awareness, but it may be associated with a sense of where your centre is: being heart-centred, or with a sense of direction or purpose. In the words of the morning puja: “therefore I recall the heart's longing for freedom”.

So where with the mindfulness of breathing the lean back in to the centre of the practice is an intention to move the centre of attention back to a tangible experience of the breath, with the metta bhavana the movement is from being **in** a hindrance to being **with** it.

Figuratively we can relate to this as

- ⑩ a move back in to being heart-centred
- ⑩ a reorientation to realign with our heart-wish
- ⑩ a step back from being-caught-up-in to being-with

Whichever of these metaphors works best, we can relate to the lean back in to the centre of the practice as bringing in an intention to make this move/reorientation/step

A MORE SUBTLE APPROACH

There is a subtlety to Bhavana meditation practice that is not about fabricating an experience as the forced result of a willed effort. When we first learn to meditate we learn the mindfulness of breathing and the metta bhavana, which are both bhavana meditation practices. We may well begin with a control approach to the practice: endeavouring to eradicate/destroy and prevent unwanted hindrances, and to cultivate and sustain desired experiences that we regard as mindfulness and metta.

If we're starting from a position of feeling stuck in unpleasant mental states that we can't do anything about, moving in to a sense that we're not stuck, we can change our state of mind is a move in the right direction.

However, the approach is limited for two reasons.

Firstly it's built on not wanting the experience we're having (that is regarded as distracted, in hindrance) and wanting a different experience (of mindfulness or metta). That is to say, it's founded in the hindrances of aversion and sense-desire that it's trying to change.

Secondly, it lacks the sensitivity that is an integral aspect of the states of mind we're trying to cultivate. Simply taking the part of that desirous/anxious/irritable part of ourselves that is regarded as a hindrance and reflecting on how it would feel to be unwanted/controlled/prevented/eradicated illustrates this.

So the way to a more effective bhavana practice is to move from a control approach in to a more subtle relationship with and sensitivity to the play of intention and experience.