

CENTERING THE ATTENTION

INWARD AND OUTWARD ASPECTS OF EXPERIENCE

Experience is integral, but has an inward and an outward aspect: like two sides of the same coin. Here we're using the word 'experience' to refer to experience-in-awareness, without making of this experience one thing and awareness another. Using the language of the five *skandhas* we could call the inward aspect Form (*rūpa*) and the outward aspect Consciousness (*vijñāna*)



CHOOSING A CENTRE OF ATTENTION

When establishing the centre of attention: what we might call the focus or object of the meditation practice, there is a pitfall of setting up a sense of distance from it is characteristic of alienated awareness: a distance or disconnection from experience. An indication of the beginnings of this in the mindfulness of breathing is having a sense of either watching or following the breath.

Alienated awareness is not in touch with the reality of experience, so investigating the real nature of what's arising in experience is integrative: it takes one from alienated to integrated awareness. We can have confidence (*śraddhā*) in this: that turning towards the actual nature of the experience arising will take us to a more positive state.

ATTENDING TO THE OUTWARD FORM OF EXPERIENCE

To investigate the outward form of experience, taking for example of touch, we can relate to the sense experience of physical contact, for example of the hand on the arm of the chair, either as an experience of the hand: the sensations in the skin and the compression of the flesh beneath – or as one of the chair: the texture of the fabric and the firmness of the upholstery beneath.

Choosing the latter: relating to the experience of contact as an experience of the form and texture of that which we're in contact with, we can go as far as possible to the outward aspect of experience, investigating what we can know (*jñāna*) in direct experience of the perceived form and texture of what has arisen (*yathā bhūta*) in our experience, without overstepping from direct experience to the idea of the thing or object that we believe we're perceiving.

ATTENDING TO THE INWARD QUALITIES OF EXPERIENCE

To investigate the inward aspect of experience we can bring a broad, open centre of attention to, for example, physical sense experience, but this time particularly noting what is present to the experience: qualities of awareness, attention, openness, sensitivity, receptivity, alertness: how does this sense experience come to be apprehended/ perceived/ known?

FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND: IMPRESSIONS IN AWARENESS

Finally, one can aim for the middle ground between the two: Impressions arising in awareness, like footprints in wet sand: the footprint is an impression in the sand. It is not to be found anywhere other than in the sand. In the same way, everything we experience is a sense-impression: an impression in awareness, not to be found anywhere other than in awareness.

MIRRORING

You may find that, taking in the whole experiential situation, there is a sort of mirroring effect: the manifestly apparent form of sense impressions reveals and reflects the quality of awareness that receives it, and awareness reveals and reflects the manifest appearance of the form of sense impression. Each reflects the other like a hall of mirrors. The two are mutually conditioned and hence empty of inherent self-existence.

ESTABLISHING AND RELAXING IN TO THE PRACTICE: A PARALLEL WITH ANAPANASATI

Particularly when choosing to work with physical sense experience, there is a parallel with the *ānāpānasati*: attending to the outward form of physical sense experience is akin to the third stage: ‘attending to the conditioned body (*kāya-saṅkhāra*) I breathe in, attending to the conditioned body I breathe out’, and attending to the inward qualities of experience is akin to the seventh stage: ‘attending to the conditioned mind (*citta-saṅkhāra*) I breathe in, attending to the conditioned mind I breathe out’.

In the *ānāpānasati*, each of these stages is followed by one of relaxing: ‘relaxing the conditioned body I breathe in/out’ (stage 4) and ‘relaxing the conditioned mind I breathe in/out’ (stage 8). This draws out the general principle of meditation that it begins with establishing the practice, establishing the awareness and the centre of attention, and then it deepens with a relaxing **in** to the practice.