

# BALANCED EFFORT

## INTENTION

The intention behind balanced effort is not to fix the attention on the object of focus. Rather it is to come to a greater understanding of the 'lean' or inclination of the mind away from that object by coming in to a relationship with it and so getting a feel for the weight/heft of it.

## QUANTITY

A balanced effort is a quantity: as little direct effort as possible, and as much as necessary to retain the focus. Too little effort will be insufficient to counter distraction. Too much will lead to tension, headaches, and a painful, dry and unpleasant experience that will build up a resistance.

## QUALITY

It is also a quality: interested, curious, persistent but not wilful or forced. Pliant but steady: a middle way between hard and soft. It is responsive to the needs of the situation with a quality of contact, flexibility and effective progress.

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. Pema Chodron talks of leaning in to the sharp point of experience. 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 – but as the pulls towards distraction are resolved it settles back in to it.

## GENTLE PRESSURE

Another way of understanding balanced effort is to meet and encounter 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.

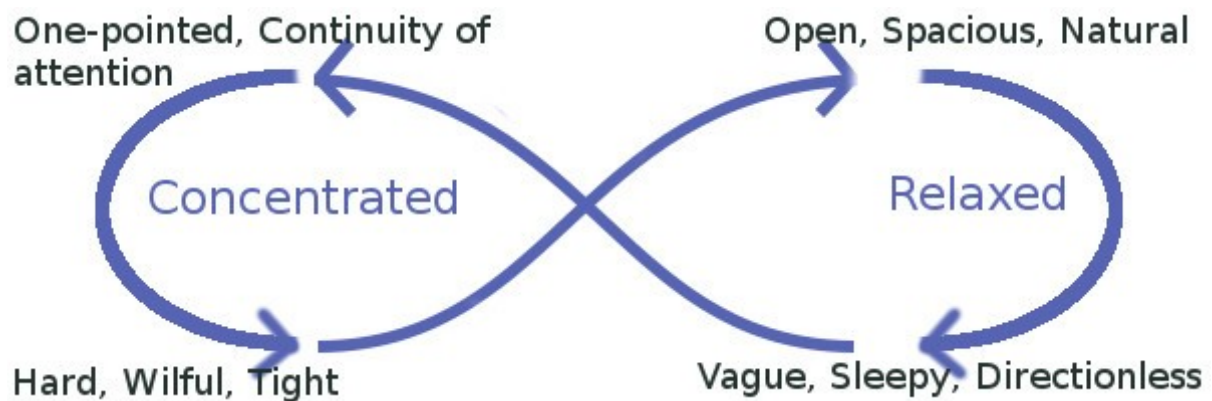
We're doing this not to crush or squeeze away an experience we don't want to have, but to engage with, explore, and understand it. A getting a feel for the quality of mind we're in, taking an interest. Again, this is experiencing the mind.

## EFFECT

Turning the mind towards the focus (vitaka) and keeping it in mind (vicara) develops one pointedness and pleasant vedana (priti and sukha). One discovers interest and enjoyment through kindly, patient attention.

## POLARITY MAP

Balanced effort relates to the polarity of concentration and relaxation in meditation



It's not that there is a perfect balance between concentration and relaxation: more that each counters a potential downside of the other:

- If your concentration gets hard / tight / wilful then relax: relaxing in to the practice rather than out of it:
  - in to the poise and balance of the posture
  - in to an open receptivity centered on the focus of attention
  - in to the clarity of awareness rather than in to distraction
- And if your relaxed state gets vague / sleepy / directionless then bring in more concentration by turning up the intensity of the presence with which you're being with the focus

## BHAVANA PRACTICES

Bhavana means cultivation and development. It's about the play of intention and experience, and bringing a sensitive awareness to and engagement with that play. Both the mindfulness of breathing (anapanasati bhavana) and the metta bhavana are bhavana practices.

There is a subtlety to Bhavana meditation practice that is not about fabricating an experience as the forced result of a willed effort. We may well begin with a control approach to the practice: endeavouring to eradicate/destroy and prevent unwanted experiences that we regard as hindrances, and to cultivate/develop and sustain desired experiences that we relate to as mindfulness and metta.

If we're starting from a position of feeling stuck in unpleasant mental states, not seeing how to do anything about them, then 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 control 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 hinder 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.

## CONDITIONALITY

Bhavana, or cultivation and development, is a creative use of the basic Buddhist teaching of dependent arising (pratitya samutpada):

This being, that becomes.

From the arising of this, that arises

Bhante points out that whilst this often happens in a reactive mode (eg in dependence on states of sense desire or ill will, a painful state of distraction arises) it can also happen in a creative mode<sup>1</sup>: as when turning attention to towards one's experience (vitaka) and taking an interest in it with kindly patient attention (viccara) leads to enjoyment (priti) which expands and settles in to a pleasurable state of mind (sukkha) as one settles in to absorption. This creative mode of conditionality is described in the earliest suttas by the Buddha<sup>2</sup> and by his follower, the Bhikkhuni Dhammadinna<sup>3</sup> and summarised by Bhante in the survey.<sup>4</sup>

Recognizing that bhavana meditation practice is an engagement with this creative mode of conditionality is to recognize that effective practice involves getting a feel for the quality of this. Conditionality is a middle way (essentially between existence and non-existence)<sup>5</sup> In relation to bhavana practice we can see it as the middle way between

A wilful effort to eradicate hindrance and make concentration happen – and

Not believing any effort can have a positive effect.

This middle way is sensitive and exploratory, getting a feel for the interplay of intention and experience. Not standing back from experience as an independent controller endeavouring to make experience change.

This sensitivity to the feel of the interplay of intention and response is the quality of balanced effort. Engaging with experience in this intimate and sensitive way includes a preparedness to be changed by the encounter as much as to effect change in it.: a radial openness and undefendedness.

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<sup>1</sup> Sangharakshita: Mind Reactive, Mind Creative

<sup>2</sup> The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Samyutta Nikaya) 12.23

<sup>3</sup> The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (Majjhima Nikaya) 44

<sup>4</sup> Sangharakshita, A Survey of Buddhism, Chapter 1, Section 14

<sup>5</sup> The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Samyutta Nikaya) 12.15