Balanced Effort

# Arrival:

* Noticing the quality of the posture:
  + Balanced or Unbalanced
  + Centered or Off Center
  + Aligned or Out of alignment
* However it is, what is the felt texture of that?
* How is it to be e.g off center?

# General Points

* There are a lot of related areas to explore around Balance
* It’s difficult to isolate a coherent bit of it
* In the sangha night I covered
  + Balanced Effort as a balance of intention to focus against the tendency of the mind to wander
  + The polarity map of concentration and relaxation
* But I didn’t cover the nature of Bhavana practice
* Bhavana practice particularly relates to
  + Effort: amount and quality
  + Purpose and intention
* So tonight
  + I will repeat the (more mindfulness related) Balanced Effort exercise from sangha night on the amount and quality of effort
  + And I will do another, more metta bhavana related exercise on purpose / intention.

# Balanced Effort Recap

## 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 into 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 into the practice. Pema Chodron talks of leaning into 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 into it.

# exercise on balance

* Center attention on the breath at the tip of the nose
* Notice again any draw of attention away from this focus: the cetana
* Balance this with a lean back into the focus
  + Not trying to stop the mind pulling away, just to balance this
  + Making as little effort as possible, lightening up until the mind wanders, then a touch more ‘lean’

# 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 into 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 in that

* 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.
* 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[[1]](#footnote-1): 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 conditiionality is described in the earliest suttas by the Buddha[[2]](#footnote-2) and by his follower, the Bhikkhuni Dhammadinna[[3]](#footnote-3) and summarised by Bhante in the survey.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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)[[5]](#footnote-5) 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.

# exercise: sensitivity and understanding

Related to stages 1 and 5 of the metta bhavana

* Bring awareness to the whole body
* Stage 1: notice whatever is particularly calling your attention:
  + What is your heart-experience now? Possibly a sense of loss from recent times of
    - Those you’ve loved
    - Connection with fraends/family
    - Opportunities
    - Freedoms
    - Livelihood/security
    - Confidence in the future
  + Fully acknowledge/receptivity to whatever comes
    - Open hearted
    - Undefended
    - Sensitivity: desire to understand
    - Light touch
* Stage 5: catching the thread of all sorrows
* Bring in awareness of others: all in the same boat
* Sensitivity now to our common human situation
* Open heartedness -> open quality of sensitive presence
* Letting go, relaxing into that.

# The tender gravity of kindness: Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know what kindness really is

you must lose things,

feel the future dissolve in a moment

like salt in a weakened broth.

What you held in your hand,

what you counted and carefully saved,

all this must go so you know

how desolate the landscape can be

between the regions of kindness.

How you ride and ride

thinking the bus will never stop,

the passengers eating maize and chicken

will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,

you must travel where the Indian in a white ponchoi

lies dead by the side of the road.

You must see how this could be you,

how he too was someone

who journeyed through the night with plans

and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,

you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.

You must wake up with sorrow.

You must speak to it till your voice

catches the thread of all sorrows

and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,

only kindness that ties your shoes

and sends you out into the day to mail letters and

    purchase bread,

only kindness that raises its head

from the crowd of the world to say

it is I you have been looking for,

and then goes with you every where

like a shadow or a friend.

--Naomi Shihab Nye, from The Words Under the Words

1. Sangharakshita: Mind Reactive, Mind Creative [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Samyutta Nikaya) 12.23 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Middle Lengh Discourses of the Buddha (Majjhima Nikaya) 44 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sangharakshita, A Survey of Buddhism, Chapter 1, Section 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Samyutta Nikaya) 12.15 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)