

When the mind fails the meditator

Source: *SD 60.1f Handbook of Meditation in Society 6: A psychopathology of Mindfulness*
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6.7.1.0 So long as our mind is subject to our senses, it is not free; it's like we having amazing toys with different shapes and colours, gadgets that play beautiful sounds and music, bottles of sweet fragrance, nice sweet foods we can lick, suck, chew and eat, and soft objects to touch and squeeze. We simply collect them and refuse to give them up. These toys and things become soiled and even make us sick; they break and decay, or get lost, and we sadly miss them.

We are so attached to these objects that we fail to learn useful skills and develop our body and mind as we grow older. So we age but never grow up. Suddenly, we fall sick and we are told we had failed to take good care of our body. We begin to forget things, time, and people, and imagine things that are not really out there. Our mind has failed us.

The best way to prevent all these problems and disasters is to work right *now* for **streamwinning**, the very first stage of the path of awakening. We are told not to be selfish, superstitious or lacking confidence, and we wish to have these qualities. But wishing and having them are very different things. We simply need to become selfless, self-reliant and confident (in good and truth): these are, in fact, the qualities of a **streamwinner**.

How then do we start practising now so that we will gain streamwinning, and be *selfless*, *self-reliant* and *confident*? The Buddha teaches us to cultivate **the 4 limbs or supports of streamwinning** (*sotāpatti-y-aṅga*):

- (1) associating with the true persons
- (2) listening to the true Dharma
- (3) wise attention
- (4) practicing the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma

These 4 limbs for streamwinning are explained in the suttas of **the Sotāpatti Saṃyutta**.¹ They are here briefly outlined for our reflection.

6.7.1.1 Associating with true individuals (*sappurisa, samseva*), those who know and practise the true teachings, and are imbued with moral virtue, wisdom and compassion, who inspire thus us to emulate them. In this way, we begin to know and understand the Buddha as the ideal of self-awakening, the Dharma as the true path to that awakening, and the sangha as the holy community of noble saints of the path or those who live emulating these noble saints and the Buddha's teaching to become self-awakened. In short, we have wise faith in the 3 jewels.²

6.7.1.2 Listening to the true teaching (*saddhamma, savana*) means taking the time to listen to ideas, explanations and teachings that train or guide us towards mental well-being, towards peacefulness and clarity, and away from selfish drives and destructive conduct.

¹ That is, in 20 suttas, S 55.55-74/5:410-413.

² On the Buddha's virtues, see **Buddhānussati**, SD 15.7; on the virtues of the Dharma, see **Dhammānussati**, SD 15.9; on the virtue of the Sangha, see **Aṭṭha, puggala S 1** (A 8.59), SD 15.10a(1).

There are many teachings about self-training and mindfulness. As we understand these good and useful teachings, we reflect on them, and put them into practice as appropriate.

Most of such writings today are based on the Buddha's teachings or teachings of Buddhist teachers. We may as well go straight to the source: the Buddhist texts themselves, available today in many good translations. The suttas are simple and clear, yet profound, in their teachings—we have the rest of our life to practise them, and we should do so daily and habitually.

Basically, the teachings train us to harmonize our actions and speech with the people around us and with our environment. Such a harmonious life is the basis for mental cultivation, of mindfulness and concentration, which in turn develop both our body and mind, so that we are physically and mentally healthy. With a healthy mind in a healthy body, we are more readily open to wisdom training.³ This is called the 3 trainings.⁴

6.7.1.3 Wise attention (*yoniso, manasikāra*) refers to the habitual practice of directing the mind or attention to see directly down to the “roots” or true nature of things. We hear all sort of advice from people and from the social media, but the best teacher is our own experience. In fact, the only thing we can really know are our own experiences (which is all there is, really): this is what the Buddha says in **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23) [6.4.1.3].

When we wisely attend to our experiences (our sensing and thinking), we will naturally notice that they are all **impermanent**: they rise and fall away: this is a universal truth. Since we know it for ourself and it is a repeatable truth, we can even call it “scientific.” The important thing is that this is a characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*) of true reality. This is true of everyone, everywhere, all the time.

When we mindfully (with mental focus) observe our actions and thoughts, we notice they are almost always attended by feelings of liking or disliking. When we look even more closely at why we like or dislike an experience or thought, we will often notice it is related to some memory of a past experience or some hope about the future. As we practise the 4th support of streamwinning [6.7.1.4] we better understand the true nature of these memories (the past and hopes (the future), that they are all gone or will never happen!

In fact, we will notice that we feel **dissatisfied** (*dukkha*) at our experiences for so many reasons. When we look into why we feel dissatisfied, we will learn that this has to do with our not really understanding and accepting that all things change and pass away. We can only “have” them for a moment (right now) and then they are gone. Our real life is but a moment. This wisdom will help us adjust ourself so that we begin to enjoy this moment just as it comes and goes: *let it come, let it go*.

6.7.1.4 The 4th and last way to expedite our attaining streamwinning in this life itself is **practising the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma** (*dhammānudhamma, paṭipatti*), which means practising meditation and cultivating wholesome states in tune with reality. This means keeping ourselves free from self-view and self-centered attitudes. Ajahn Amaro reminds us:

This is because we often practise meditation in tune with our egotistical drives (“Because I want to attain enlightenment and be the most impressive!”) or with a sense of obligation, because we have been told to “do it this way” by an expert or a

³ For related suttas, see SD 3.3 (4.1.1+4.1.2).

⁴ See Sīla samādhi paññā, SD 21.6.

teacher. We can engage in meditation driven by obligation, by obedience, by ambition, by aggression: “I’m going to wipe out my defilements. I’m going to make my thinking mind shut up!” But this is practising Dhamma not in accordance with Dhamma, but in accordance with aggression, with self-view, and with aversion, ambition and greed, and so forth.

(Amaro, “Unshakeable well-being,” 2019:1955)⁵

If Buddhist practice can be summarized in one word, it is **renunciation** (*nekkhamma*). The best way we can attain the path, even arhathood itself in this life, is as a renunciant keeping to the Dharma-Vinaya: *monastic life* provides us with the ideal conditions for full renunciation. Whether monastic or lay, we must practise renunciation at our own pace, that is, renouncing what is negative in our body, speech and mind (the 3 karmic doors that always lead back to samsara).⁶

Bodily renunciation refers to the mindful habit of letting go of whatever is unwholesome and unhelpful to our physical health. Ethically, this means respecting life (ours and others), the happiness of others, and their personal space and freedom (these qualities are, in fact, embodied in the first 3 of the 5 precepts).⁷

Verbal renunciation is the habit of refraining from speech that is false, divisive, harsh or unbeneficial, and the practice of right speech, that is, speech that is true, unifying, pleasant, and beneficial. In short, this is communication that is helpful and healing.

Mental renunciation is training ourselves to let go of negative ideas and views, and cultivating wholesome ones. This is best done through meditation. Even when we have difficulties meditating, we can cultivate mindfulness and awareness.⁸ Through meditation or mindfulness, we learn to let go of negative thoughts, even all thoughts, so that our mind is calm and clear, healing us and helping us to see people in a positive way, and see the true nature of life and the world so that we live truly happily and beneficially, evolving on the path of personal growth and spiritual liberation.⁹

R830 Inspiration 483

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⁵ Ajahn Amaro, “Unshakeable well-being: is the Buddhist concept of enlightenment a meaningful possibility in the current age?” *Mindfulness* 10 2019:1952-1956.

⁶ These are the 3 doors of karma: see SD 5.7 (2.2.2).

⁷ On the 5 precepts, see **Veḷu,dvāreyya S**, SD 1.5 (2); **Sīlānussati**, SD 15.11 (2.2); SD 21.6 (1.2); SD 37.8 (2.2).

⁸ See **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1.

⁹ On renunciation (*nekkhamma*) as spiritual practice (esp meditation), see **Hālidakāni S 1** (S 22.3/3:9-12), SD 10.12; **Sexuality**, SD 31.7 (1.6.2); **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (14.7).