

Potential Project's Approach to Mindfulness

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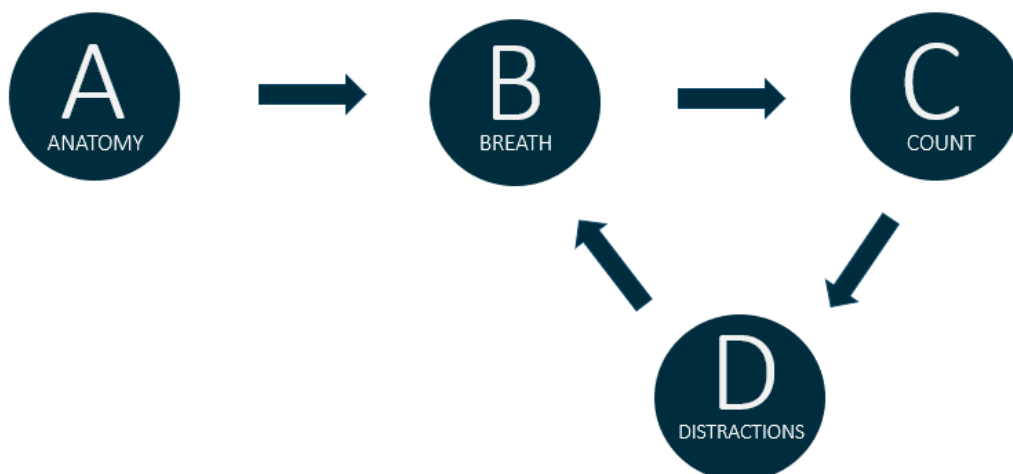


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Introduction

Mindfulness has spread widely in the Western world for the last decades. In this transition process adaptations have been made. In many contexts, the tradition has been simplified or even made superficial. There is a tendency to present a light version of mindfulness defined as “bare attention,” or moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness of whatever arises in the present moment. There is a risk that mindfulness is reduced to a kind of therapy to simply make life more enjoyable, rather than a system of theory and practice designed to liberate us completely, including destroying all mental afflictions. If mindfulness is only seen as a method to make life more enjoyable it has serious implications on how it is taught and thereby the results of the practice.

Potential Project does not adhere to the simplified understanding of mindfulness as “bare attention” and aims at influencing the general understanding of the practice in the Western world by presenting mindfulness closer to the way it is taught in the oldest and most authoritative texts. In the following pages it is explained how Potential Project defines mindfulness and how we present it.

This document is intended for internal use only. It includes many references to the Buddhist traditions that underlies our materials and approach. As our mission is to contribute to a more peaceful world by helping individuals and teams in organizations become more mindful and effective in everything we do, in the main, use corporate language as opposed to the references and terminology found in this document. If asked, we are very comfortable sharing the underlying sources and teachings and are happy to do so, if this will be of benefit.

Definition of Mindfulness

The renowned Buddhist mindfulness teacher and practitioner Alan Wallace shares the concern of Potential Project that mindfulness at large will be equated with “bare attention”. For the past 30 years he has looked deep into the roots and definitions of mindfulness in both the Theravada and the Mahayana traditions and has not found much discrepancy in how mindfulness is defined in those traditions. However, he has found a big discrepancy between how mindfulness is explained in the oldest authoritative texts and in the modern world.

Alan Wallace says that when mindfulness is equated with bare attention, it can easily lead to the misconception that the cultivation of mindfulness has nothing to do with ethics or with the cultivation of wholesome states of mind and the attenuation of unwholesome states. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the Pali Abhidhamma, where mindfulness is listed as a wholesome mental factor, it is not depicted as bare attention but as a mental factor that clearly distinguishes wholesome from unwholesome mental states and behavior. And it is used to support wholesome states and counteract unwholesome states.

Alan Wallace uses an example of a sniper hiding in the grass, waiting to shoot his enemy. He may be quietly aware of whatever arises with each passing moment. But because he is intent on killing, he is practicing wrong mindfulness. In fact, he is practicing bare attention without an ethical component. Generally speaking, right mindfulness has to be integrated with introspection involving clear comprehension (*sampajanna*), and it is only when these two works together that right mindfulness can fulfill its intended purpose.

Alan Wallace has found that according to the oldest texts right mindfulness emerges only within the context of *right view* and *right intention*. In the Theravada tradition, right view focuses on the themes of impermanence, suffering and non-self. Right intention is the motivation to achieve liberation from all mental afflictions. In the Mahayana tradition, right view is the perspective of impermanence, dependent origination and emptiness. Right intention is the motivation to achieve full understanding on the nature of reality to better be able to help others.

Introduction

Mindfulness is often equated with the Pali term *Sati*. *Sati* is often equated with bare attention. But bare attention is only a part of *Sati*. Bare attention is the initial phase in the meditative development of right mindfulness. But mindfulness is more than that. Mindfulness contains a high degree of discernment and an active process of cultivating constructive states of mind. A few examples of texts explaining this are:

“And what monks, is the faculty of Sati? Here, monks, the noble disciple has sati, he is endowed with perfect Sati and intellect, he is one who remembers, who recollects what was done and said long before.” The Buddha as cited in *Saṃyutta-Nikāya V* 197-8.

“Sati, when it arises, calls to mind wholesome and unwholesome tendencies, with faults and faultless, inferior and refined, dark and pure, together with their counterparts; Sati, when it arises, follows the courses of beneficial and unbeneficial tendencies: these tendencies are beneficial, these unbeneficial; these tendencies are helpful, these unhelpful. Thus, one who practices yoga rejects unbeneficial tendencies and cultivates beneficial tendencies.” Nagasena in the *Milindapanha* (Possibly the earliest attempt in Buddhist literature to state what *Sati* is). Cited from *The Buddhist Path to Awakening* by R. Gethlin.

“Sati’s characteristic is not floating; its property is not losing; its manifestation is guarding or the state of being face to face with an object; its basis is strong noting or the close application of mindfulness of the body and so on. It should be seen as like a post due to its state of being set in the object, and as like a gate-keeper because it guards the gate of the eye and so on”. Buddhagosa (the most authoritative commentator of the Theravada tradition) *The Path of Purification XIV*.

Mindfulness and Discernment

In the Tibetan language the most common words for mindfulness is *dren shey*. Often *dren shey* is translated into English only as mindfulness, but there is more to the word. *Dren* can be understood as a variant of the verb “to remember”. It points at the quality of remembering or keeping certain qualities in mind. Developing the mental ability of constant remembrance is a prerequisite for taking control of our thoughts, thought patterns and all speech and actions.

The second syllable *shey* can be translated as discernment or introspection. It refers to the mental ability of being aware of what is going on in the mind in order to adjust mental activities when required.

The Nyingma master Longchenpa said:

*“Mindfulness is like an excellent hook
That grasps the wild, untrained elephant of the mind
It completely reverses fault so that one naturally enters virtue,
From this moment, the mind should rely upon it.*

*Discernment is like an undistracted, excellent night watchman.
The thief of non-virtue cannot find an opportunity to steal
The many gems of virtue, which it protects.
From this moment, one should certainly rely upon it.*

Suggested reading on this topic:

“A Mindful Balance”, by Alan Wallace.

“Mindfulness Meditation: an Abhidhamma Perspective”, by Andrew Olendzki.

“The Nature of Mindfulness and Its Role in Buddhist Meditation”, by Alan Wallace and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

“The Attention Revolution” (page 59-63), by Alan Wallace.

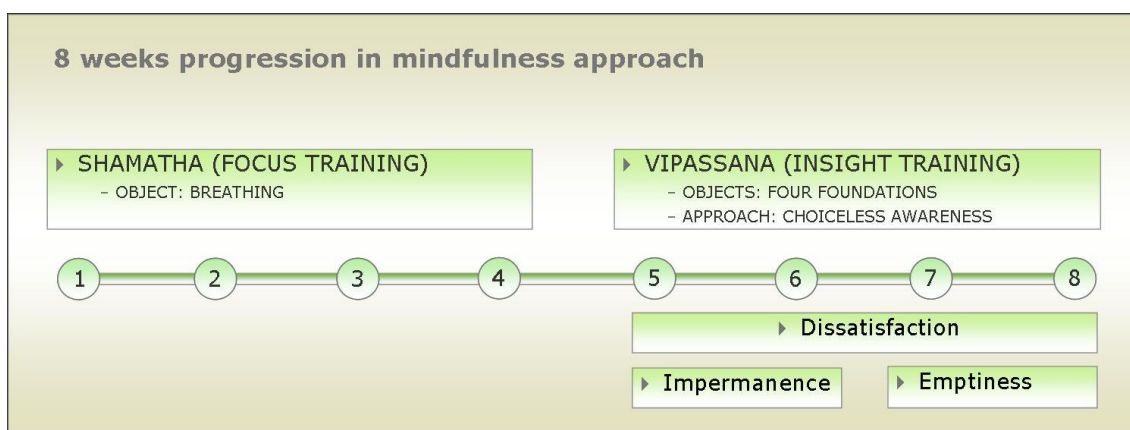
“The Path of Purification”, by Buddhaghosa.

“The Way of Mindfulness: The Satipatthana Sutta and Commentary”, by Soma Thera.

“Momentary Buddhahood – Mindfulness on the Vajrayana Path”, by Anyen Rinpoche.

Shamatha and Vipassana: Two Aspects of Mindfulness

Mindfulness includes two main meditation approaches: Shamatha and Vipassana. Potential Project’s Corporate Based Mindfulness Training (CBMT) program generally progresses from Shamatha towards Vipassana during the first eight weeks as illustrated in the diagram below. The first 4 weeks the primary focus is on Shamatha training, and the last 4 weeks on Vipassana training. Adaptations to this can be made if the program is of shorter or longer duration.



Shamatha

Shamatha is training the attentional muscle. It is developing the ability to stay single pointed focused on a single object at will. Without this ability our mind is like an untamed elephant without a leach. Without some degree of stability of mind, we are like a sailboat with a big sail but without ability to steer.

Shamatha (zhi-gnas) is a stilled and settled state of mind, stilled of the obstacles to concentration and settled single-pointedly on an object or in a particular state. In addition, fully developed Shamatha has a further mental factor accompanying it: a sense of physical and mental fitness (pliability, flexibility).

The Tibetan master Lama Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) emphasizes that for the contemplative cultivation of insight (Vipassana) to eliminate forever the mental affliction that lie at the root of suffering, such insight must be conjoined with a high degree of sustained voluntary attention (Shamatha).

By itself, Shamatha does not have the mental factor of discernment (analysis). Discernment is an active understanding of the fine details of the nature of something. Shamatha does not imply verbal thinking, although it may be induced by verbally thinking.

Because the receivers of Potential Project mindfulness programs are busy people with little time, we have condensed the vast teachings on Shamatha into a four-step method: the *A-B-C-D Focus Training*.

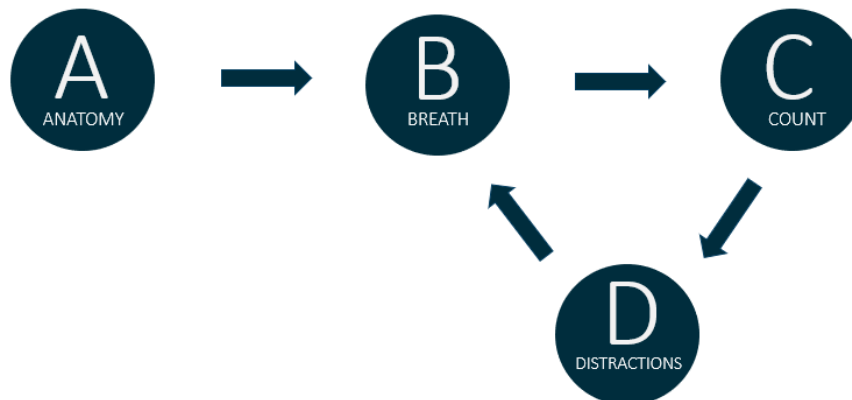
Suggested reading on Shamatha:

“*Attention Revolution*”, Alan Wallace,

“*Lam Rim Chenmo: Volume Three, Chapter Three: Focusing our Mind*”, Lama Tsongkhapa

A-B-C-D Focus Training: Shamatha in Potential Project

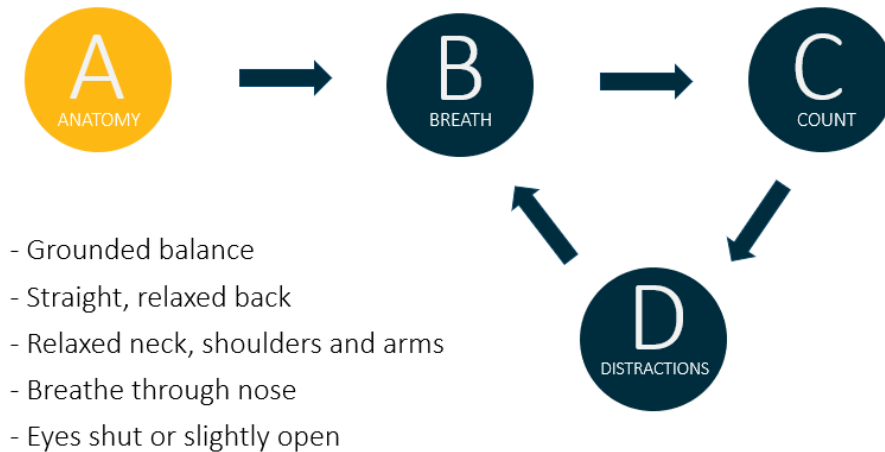
The A-B-C-D is a formula that is easy to remember and easy to teach in a short time. For participants this formula is enough to know for the first weeks of the program. Only after that we expand the concept of mindfulness when we enter the fifth week and thereby change the perspective on mindfulness into the Vipassana path. However, the A-B-C-D still serves as the foundation even in the presentation of Vipassana.



Anatomy

The first step of A-B-C-D is the A for Anatomy. This step contains few simple instructions on body posture. It is important to deflate participant's worries that they must sit in certain ways to practice mindfulness training. Mindfulness is a mental activity. The workshop is in the mind. The instructions for the anatomy are only supporting advices to counteract that any bodily discomfort comes in the way for the training. During the weeks of Shamatha training the body should simply be as comfortable as possible (as we enter the Vipassana training however, the sensation of bodily pain or discomfort can be taken as object for the training).

The five simple points we present regarding posture are:



Grounded balance

A grounded balance refers to two things. First that the feet are in the ground, second that our body is in balance, not leaning forward, backward or to the sides. Our body posture has great influence on our mental state. If we lean forward or lean to the back of the chair there is a greater chance that we become sleepy and have difficulties to focus. One should sit in alignment with gravity so it is not necessary to use muscles to compensate for any imbalance anywhere.

Straight, relaxed back

The posture of the back in particular has a great influence on our mental state. A straight back is very conducive for a stable and focused mind. However, the straightness should not be overdone so it becomes a tense back. A straight but relaxed back is key.

Relaxed neck, shoulders and arms

In general, it is conducive for the training that the entire body is relaxed. Particularly for people in stressed working environments, working many hours at the computer, the neck, shoulders and arms tend to become tense and sore. Instructing people to be aware of relaxing these can be a big help. For some it is good to take a moment to roll the shoulders up and down for them to find their resting point. The hands can be placed in the lap or on the knees. No specific mudras are needed. The hands simply need a place to rest.

Breathe through nose

Rather than breathing through the mouth, we recommend that people breathe through the nose if they can. When breathing through the nose, we tend to be more focused and have a clearer mind.

Eyes shut or slightly open

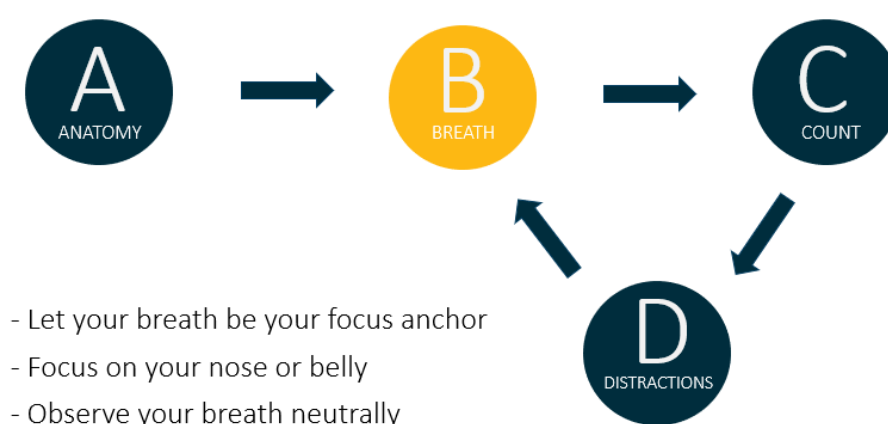
The primary instruction regarding the eyes is to keep them shut. This is working the best for most. However, there are two good reasons to keep the eyes slightly open for some. First, it can feel uncomfortable to sit with eyes shut together with a group of colleagues. Second, for some closing the eyes activate sleepiness immediately. In this case it is good to open the eyes slightly and thereby letting some light in. The light helps to stay awake and fresh.

Whatever the reason for opening the eyes is, the instruction is to place the eyes in a 45-degree angle at the floor or table in front with a soft gaze.

From this anatomical foundation the practitioner is ready to move on to the B for breathing.

Breathing

When we close our eyes we can become aware that our attention is constantly moving from object to object whether the objects are thoughts, sounds, smells, bodily sensations or something else. The objective of Shamatha is to develop the ability to stay focused on one object by will. For that we need to choose a single object as the anchor point of our attention.



Let your breath be your focus anchor

There are more good reasons for choosing the breath as our object. First, we always have it with us as long as we live and are therefore always able to turn to it whether we are sitting in formal training, driving the car or sitting in a meeting. Second, the breath can be seen as a bridge between the mind and the body. Focusing on it and developing familiarity with it has many benefits in relation to both our physical and mental states.

Observing the breath at the belly region

Traditionally, there are three main points of observing the breath: the nostrils, the belly and the full flow of the breathing. In the beginning it can be confusing for the participants to have to experiment with three different points because they only have limited time for it. Therefore, in the first session, we ask them to choose either the nose or the belly.

Taking the belly region as object has the benefit that people naturally develop a deeper and healthier breath. Also, it is said that if one's mind tends to wander a lot, focusing on the belly region makes you more grounded and is best for securing stability in your focusing on the breath. It is very easy for most to observe the breathing on something as tangible as a moving belly. The instruction is simply to observe the breath by the movement of the belly. Observing the rising of the belly as one breathes in and the falling as one breathes out.

However, each participant has their individual characteristics and natural preferences so if they find it easier to focus on the breath going in and out through the nose that is also perfectly fine.

FOCUSING

Later on, in session 2 or 3, we introduce the option of focusing on the full flow of the breathing. At that point participants have gained some experience with the practice with focusing on either the belly or the nose but may find it more natural to focus on the full flow of breathing. People can then experiment with the three breath objects and find their own preference.

Observe your breath neutrally

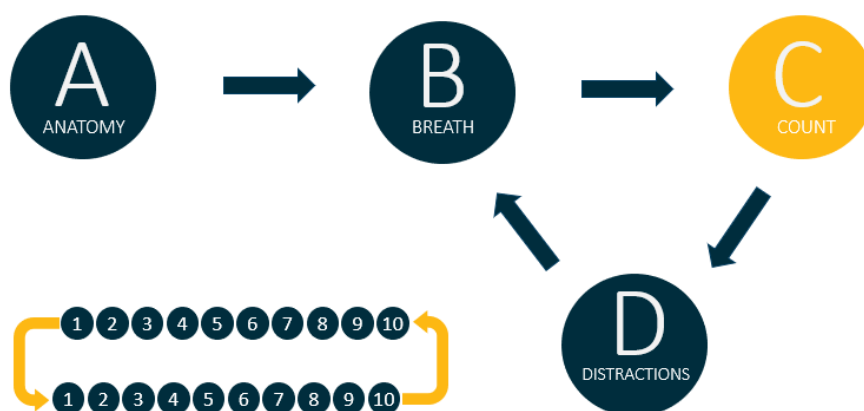
The crucial point for the observation of the breath is that it is done in a neutral, not engaging manner. We are not trying to change or control the breathing. We do not try to have deep, shallow, long or short breathing. We simply let the breath breathe while we observe it neutrally. An analogy to this is the way we watch the news in TV. We do not try to make the speaker say certain things. We do not try to control what is taking place on the screen. We simply observe whatever takes place in a non-engaged, neutral manner.

This way of observing neutrally is difficult for many in the beginning. They have difficulties to recognize when they get engaged. The only remedy to this is to keep practicing. It is like tuning into a radio channel – in the beginning it is just noise but at some point we find the right tune.

Observing the breathing at the belly region in a neutral manner is the objective of the A-B-C-D Shamatha training. However, for beginners as well as for experienced practitioners, the ability to stay focused on this one object is often not strong enough. Our mindfulness needs support to stay with the object. The C for Counting supports us.

Counting

Using breath-counting as a way of supporting concentration to stay with its object is widely used in the Theravada tradition and explicitly in Zen. The technique is very helpful for many beginners as well as for advanced practitioners. However, for some it becomes a distraction disabling them to stay aware of the breathing. We therefore recommend that the counting is optional. It can be used when helpful and left out when not.



Counting at out-breath

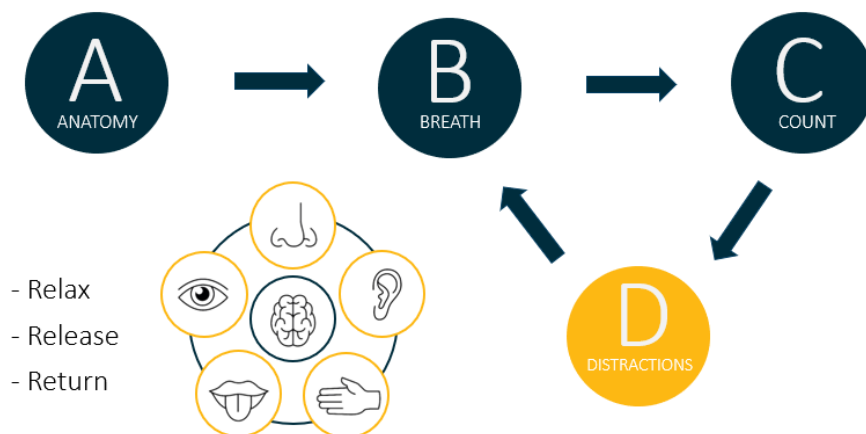
We count at each out-breath. During the in-breath most people experience an increased focus and during the out-breath an increased relaxation – and thereby danger of losing focus. The counting is placed at the out-breath to counteract losing focus.

Counting cycles

The counting starts at one and continues up to ten. When ten is reached, one counts backwards down to one again. During the training we sit and count cycles up and down between one and ten. Counting backwards takes a bit more effort than counting forward. This extra effort supports the ability to focus. If the practitioner loses the counting in distractions or suddenly finds that he has reached more than ten, he simply starts from one again.

Distractions

At some point any mindfulness practitioner suddenly finds himself engaged in distractions in the form of thoughts, sounds, feelings or others. The attention has simply gone astray and has become captured by a distraction.



The six sources of distractions

There are six sources of distractions. Those are the perception-channels of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind in general. This means that any distraction derives from one of these six sources. However, mindfulness training is not about engaging in distractions but rather the opposite.

In formal mindfulness training (at a beginner level) the two most dominant sources of distractions are the mind (thoughts) and the ears (sounds).

Relax, release, return

When the practitioner perceives to be distracted by a thought, sound, or sensation, he should notice if it creates tension anywhere in the body and then try to *relax* about it. To discover being distracted is a little success and should be regarded as such. It is a success because realizing that one is distracted means that mindfulness of the purpose of the training has been regained. Instead of getting frustrated or annoyed the distraction should be regarded as a good friend – a gentle reminder that the attention has drifted. Mindfulness training at the Shamatha level is characterized by this movement of being fully attentive to the breath, then becoming distracted, becoming aware of the distraction and then returning the full attention to the breathing.

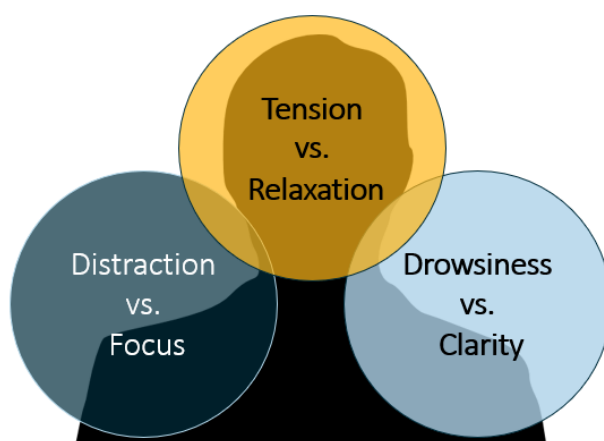
SHAMATHA

Then after having discovered being distracted and applied relaxation, one should simply *release* the distraction and redirect the attention towards the breath. The full focus can only be in one place at the time and if the breath is chosen, then the distraction is gradually released. Once the distraction has been released and a sense of relaxation have been regained, then one *returns* to full attention on the breath with renewed focus and awareness.

Three Challenges and Qualities

When practicing Shamatha, generally there are three main challenges and we present three core qualities to overcome them. Usually these are introduced in the first session of the program (after the introductory workshop).

THREE CHALLENGES AND QUALITIES



Tension vs. Relaxation

We have all been neurologically programmed to perform and many of us are under constant pressure. This creates deep neurological patterns of tension in our nervous system. Practitioners may find that when practicing they are still caught up in performance mode – to push oneself to follow the training instructions without truly understanding their greater purpose. But wanting to “be good at” mindfulness so you can get it over with and enjoy the benefits as soon as possible will not get you very far. Sharp focus only comes from a relaxed mind so to release tension is crucial. When breathing in, scan the body to identify points of tension. When breathing out pay attention to that point and allow the tensions to release. It may be necessary to repeat this several times – take as much time needed with each tension point before moving on to the next point of tension.

Distraction vs. Focus

Sometimes the mind can be overactive, wandering and following every distraction that arises. When the mind is overstimulated one then becomes frustrated and then tries to force greater attention to the breath which will be exhausting. Therefore, the first response to an overactive mind is to relax. Another approach is to let go of expectations to perform. Let your breath hold your attention – let the breathing work by itself. Rest the attention effortlessly in this movement as a neutral observer.

Drowsiness vs. Clarity

It may seem that with a drowsy mind, the objective of mindfulness training has been achieved – to be calm and relaxed. However, a drowsy mind is also experienced as a dark, foggy, and dull mind which is opposite to a fully awake and clear mind – a mind that sees clearly and experiences the finest details, like a high-definition monitor. When experiencing drowsiness, it is needed to arouse the attention and alertness which can be done by sitting up a little straighter or taking an intentionally deep breath. The eyes can be opened a little, looking down on the floor in front. Another strategy is to cultivate a sense of curiosity about the breath – to see each breath as a new experience and notice its subtle details. When noticing any sign of drowsiness, increase the alertness in these ways so the drowsiness does not take hold.

The outcome of the Shamatha training is a stable mind that can attend to whatever object it wishes for longer periods of time without giving into distractions. This stability of mind enables the practitioner to start a discernment of the three characteristics of the mind and the outside world; dissatisfying, impermanent and empty of inherent existence. This happens 4 weeks into the program when we introduce the Vipassana approach.

Vipassana

Shamatha is an incredible tool to learn to direct our attention by will and to develop high degrees of focus and relaxation. However, it does not eliminate our afflictions by the root, but merely gives us a break from them. Vipassana (often called Insight Meditation) on the other hand is a radical approach to eliminating all our afflictions by their root.

It is often taught that Shamatha is an absolute prerequisite for practicing Vipassana; that one needs to develop ability to stay single-pointedly focused on an object in order to investigate the mind and nature of reality through the perspective of Vipassana. However, we are all different and to some, the approach of Vipassana is helpful even at very early stages. Some experience that it is easier to observe the impermanence and emptiness of things than to stay single pointed focused on one object. However, generally it is helpful for most to familiarize with some mental stability first by means of Shamatha.

Vipassana is a compound of two words: *vi* and *passana*. *Vi* means various, referring to the three characteristics of dissatisfaction, impermanence and emptiness. *Passana* means right understanding or realization by means of mindfulness of one's mind and the physical reality. Vipassana therefore means the direct realization of the three characteristics of one's mind and reality.

Vipassana is clear direct insight into physical and mental phenomena as they arise and disappear, seeing them for what they actually are; empty of inherent existence. Vipassana is a method which eventually leads to the attainment of freedom of afflictions, a stable mental peace and genuine happiness. In the practice of Vipassana, insight arises through a direct meditative observation of one's own bodily and mental processes and it is based on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as explained in the Satipatthana Sutra. The four foundations are described in the end of this document.

From the 5th week of the CBMT-program Vipassana is introduced as *Open Awareness* with an emphasis on impermanence for the first two weeks and on emptiness the last two. Through all four weeks the aspect of dissatisfaction is an underlying theme.

Vipassana for Business People

Most people in corporations are living very busy lives with much activity at all times. In their lives there is neither time nor mental space to develop the highest degrees of Shamatha. Taking the business and distractions as object for the training and thereby transforming them into stepping stones is therefore an approach that has proven very beneficial in our context.

Business people often have busy minds. For some the Vipassana method is a big relief. For others it is a relief to be able to stay with the breath as primary anchor for the attention. It is important, repeatedly to stress that there is value in both Shamatha and Vipassana and each participant must judge which approach is most helpful at any given moment. Sometimes it is even better to shift between the two approaches during a single session.

Vipassana makes a smooth transition from the Shamatha in the 5th week of the program. It is a smooth transition because it is merely a change of perspective on the A-B-C-D formula and not a completely new method. This is crucial due to the short time we have for introducing it.

Vipassana is amongst others transmitted to Western Vipassana teachers by Mahasi Sayadaw from Burma. There are various terms for the practice; “just sitting” or “shikantaza” (Zen); Choiceless Awareness (Theravada/Vipassana), some other words are intuitive awareness (Ajahn Sumedho), open awareness (Jack Kornfield), panoramic awareness (Trungpa Rinpoche). All refer to the same approach.

Following are some quotes of different teachers, all pointing to the same approach to Vipassana.

From Lama Thubten Yeshe, *The Peaceful Stillness of the Silent Mind*:

“At certain times, a silent mind is very important, but “silent” does not mean closed. The silent mind is an alert, awakened mind; a mind seeking the nature of reality. Instead of trying to stop problems emotionally by grasping at new material objects or ideas, check up silently to see what’s happening in your mind. No matter what sort of mental problem you experience, instead of getting nervous and fearful, sit back, relax, and be as silent as possible. In this way you will automatically be able to see reality and understand the root of the problem. If miserable thoughts or bad ideas arise in your mind, just watch how they come, how they go. Don’t react emotionally. When you investigate your mind thoroughly, you can see clearly that both miserable and ecstatic thoughts come and go. Moreover, when you investigate penetratingly, they disappear altogether. When you are preoccupied with an experience, you think, “I’ll never forget this experience,” but when you check up skilfully, it automatically disappears. That is the silent wisdom experience.”

From Alan Wallace, *The Buddhist Tradition of Shamatha*:

“It was for this purpose that the technique of ‘settling the mind in its natural state’ has been devised and taught within the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist tradition (Dalai Lama & Berzin, 1997, pp. 37–142; Karma Chagmé, 1998, p. 80). This method, like all other techniques for developing Shamatha, entails freeing the mind from distraction, so that one’s attention is not compulsively carried away by either mental or sensory stimuli. However, this method is exceptional in that the attention is not fixed upon any object. Here one gazes steadily into the space in front of one, but without visually focusing on anything. Mentally, one brings the attention into the domain of the mind, and whenever any type of mental event is observed—be it a thought, an image, a feeling, a desire, and so on—one simply takes note of it, without conceptually classifying it, and without trying to suppress or sustain it. Letting one’s mind remain at ease, one watches all manner of mental events arise and pass of their own accord, without intervention of any kind. Settling one’s awareness in the present, the attention is not allowed to stray off in thoughts concerning the past or the future, nor does one latch onto any object in the present.

Normally when thoughts arise, one conceptually engages with the referents, or intentional objects, of those thoughts, but in this practice one perceptually attends to the thoughts themselves, without judging or evaluating them. The heart of the practice is allowing one's consciousness to remain in its 'natural state', limpid and vivid, without becoming embroiled in fluctuating emotions and habitual thought patterns."

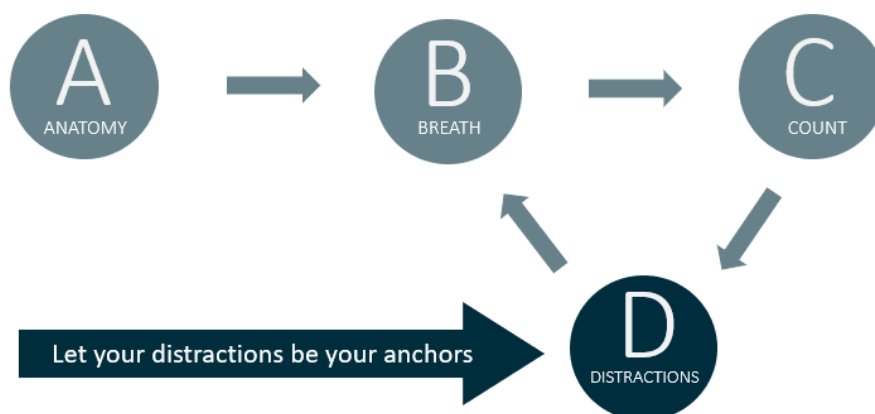
From Jack Kornfield, A Mind Like Sky; Wise Attention and Open Awareness:

"As you rest in this open awareness, notice how thoughts and images also arise and vanish like sounds. Let the thoughts and images come and go without struggle or resistance. Pleasant and unpleasant thoughts, pictures, words and feelings move unrestricted in the space of mind. Problems, possibilities, joys and sorrows come and go like clouds in the clear sky of mind."

How to Practice Vipassana

In the A-B-C-D participants are asked to focus on the breath and keep that as the anchor for attention. In Vipassana (Open Awareness), the anchor changes as we let go of the breath and open up to anything arising in the field of our awareness. In other words, the distractions become the anchor of attention.

OPEN AWARENESS TRAINING



In Vipassana one sits with awareness of whatever happens to be arising from moment to moment – sensations, feelings, thoughts and emotions. As the Buddha instructs in the Majjhima Nikaya, "Develop a mind that is vast like space, where experiences both pleasant and unpleasant can appear and disappear without conflict, struggle or harm, rest in the mind like a vast sky."

Vipassana requires a certain degree of concentration (acquired through Shamatha) to gather and focus the mind, but the concentrated mind is then directed to a moving object — the flowing stream of our experiences — rather than being stabilized on a single point. Whereas concentration practice involves returning the mind again and again to the primary object of training, Vipassana allows the mind to follow whatever is arising in experience. The crucial point though, is not to get engaged with the experiences and thoughts arising, but to simply observe them neutrally. We observe thoughts like we observed the breath in Shamatha; neutral, non-engaged and non-controlling. When we learn to observe our thoughts neutrally, we become free from the entanglement of our own mind. There is less a sense of controlling *what* the awareness is resting upon and more care given to *how* awareness is manifesting.

As we guide Vipassana, we start out for a few moments by stabilizing the attention on the breath. After a few in and out breaths we let go of the attention of the breath and open up our awareness. We instruct people, that if they get confused and too distracted, they can return to the breath and stabilize the attention. Again, when stabilized, open up and include whatever is there in your field of attention.

Instead of fighting with, fleeing from, or identifying with what is there, everything gets noticed by kind awareness. Let go of trying to make anything happen. Simply let breath, sensation and sound come into your awareness. Include smell, taste and all forms of thinking. All experiences are treated the same. Allow yourself to open to the entire range of your experience.

Notice each experience or thought as it arises. Allow that object to be there and take it as the anchor of your attention. Again, in a neutral, non-engaged, non-controlled way. And observe it as it fades away again at some point. Then, allow any new experience or thought to arise and take that as object. Observe any experience arising, abiding and fading. Over and over again.

As an aid not to get entangled in a thought, you can give it a label, a name. If you think about what you need to buy, simply give it the label “shopping list”. This mental noting keeps you from getting pulled into the experience. It is not a way to detach your mind from you experience, but to create a gap and keep it neutral.

LABELLING YOUR DISTRACTIONS



In Vipassana, we hide from nothing. We develop a kind of courage and acceptance of how things naturally unfolding, not driven by hope and fear. We are giving up the hope for something special or different to happen. In Vipassana, we do not judge, blame, or condemn whatever emotions arise in the mind. Vipassana keeps us attuned to the present, it is not thinking about what we experience, but a direct attention to experience itself. It regards any and all parts of experience with an even, nonreactive awareness. We do not get involved in the content of our thoughts, like a shepherd keeps an eye on a flock of sheep – attentive but uninvolved.

If at some point you experience no thoughts or experiences arising, simply allow yourself to rest in that silence of mind. Take this calmness as the object of your attention. Without grasping at it and holding it tight, simply rest in it.

Where Shamatha Becomes Vipassana

The method as described above is actually merely a Shamatha practice. Shamatha with a moving object. The practice above has a term; “Settling the mind in its natural state”, and makes a smooth transition into Vipassana. The border between Shamatha and Vipassana is when we start to ask questions. Where Shamatha is free of any concepts or discourses, Vipassana includes subtle discernment.

As one has familiarized with the constant arising and passing of experiences and moods, a subtle discernment of any experience can begin. The discernment is not the same as analytical meditation. Where analytical meditation is often a list of points one goes through, discernment is applied on whatever arises in the field of experience. There is no agenda and no control, only a certain perspective of viewing the experience through; the three perspectives of Vipassana; dissatisfaction (suffering), impermanence and potential (emptiness).

The Three Perspectives of Vipassana

In Vipassana, we observe experiences and thoughts arising, and while we do that we observe them through the lens of the three perspectives. As an example, we observe the dissatisfactory nature of thoughts, by observing our reaction to them. More specifically, when a thought arises of a meeting we need to attend, we may have a stressful reaction to it. This simple experience teaches us that thoughts and our mind is the main creator of the suffering and problems we experience in life.

Dissatisfaction (dukkha)

Dissatisfaction is an underlying theme of Vipassana and should get a little attention at every session during the last four sessions of the first eight weeks of the program. No matter how well things may be going, we never truly relax. We are not at ease with ourselves. This uneasiness has nothing to do with whether we feel relatively happy or sad at any given moment. It is that beneath the ever-fluctuating moods we experience from moment to moment, things are never quite right.

IS THIS EXPERIENCE A SOURCE OF STRESS?



With the perspective of dissatisfaction, we acknowledge that a big part of the tension and stress in our mind and body comes through the way we relate to our experiences, what we make out of them, what meaning we give to them. We start to understand that we can always change the way we relate to our experiences and with that create causes for feeling more at ease and relaxed. More happy.

The objective is to have participants see and experience that they create suffering through their own mind and thoughts. When we realize that ninety nine percent of the problems we encounter are rooted in our own mind we are also offered the key to changing it, namely by changing our own mind. By means of mindfulness training we are able to achieve permanent elimination of our problems.

Impermanence (anicca)

Impermanence refers to the constant movement of the content of the mind, reality and the perception of reality. Through the perspective of impermanence, we familiarize with the rising and passing away of everything within our mental and physical continuum. We familiarize with the momentariness of our experiences very clearly. We notice that within the flow of our experiences there is nothing solid, nothing concrete, nothing lasting. Not even the thoughts that put us under pressure, the thoughts that makes us frightened and the thoughts that excites us. When we familiarize with impermanence the thoughts lose their grip in us. We become free from the negative impact they normally have on us.

IS ANY EXPERIENCE PERMANENT?



Subtle impermanence refers to the fact that the moment things and events come into existence, they are already impermanent in nature; the moment they arise, the process of their disintegration has already begun. When something comes into being from its causes and conditions, the seed of its cessation is born along with it. It is not that something comes into being and then a third factor or condition causes its disintegration. That is not how to understand impermanence. Impermanence means that as soon as something comes into being, it has already started to decay. Mindfulness training points us toward becoming equanimous in the middle of change and wiser in how we respond to what comes and goes.

Emptiness (anatta)

The familiarization with impermanence also has an impact on the way we see ourselves. Neurologically we are all disposed to seeing ourselves as a solid and independent entity. Within the discernment in the perspective of emptiness one begins to see the selfless quality of oneself and all phenomena. Eventually we will see that all our experiences are all impermanent and lack a substantial self. The whole notion of an independent, solid self who is experiencing these things is imaginary. As that lifelong notion falls away or at least weakens we start to see ourselves and all phenomena in a different way. Instead of seeing what we normally see we start to see the

potentials in things. Instead of seeing our normal limited perceptions we start to open to the limitless nature of everything.

WHAT IS EXPERIENCING ALL OF THIS?



The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness were taught by the Buddha and are explained in the Satthipatthana Sutra and the Anapanasati Sutra. The four foundations refer to the four fields of experience a mindfulness practitioner is observing. In Shamatha the primary foundation is the first foundation; the body experienced through the breath. In Vipassana the awareness is expanded towards the other three; feelings, mind and wisdom. In the CBMT program we do not explicitly present these four applications. We merely ask participants to open the awareness to whatever arises (which in the end will come from any of the four).

Breathing with the Body

Our A-B-C-D approach starts with the body (anatomy). The first step is to become briefly aware of the body and then point the attention to the breath. The body and breath are the two main aspects of the first foundation. The body is experienced through the breathing and the breathing through the body.

Breathing with Feelings

In English “feeling” has a wide range of meaning. The Pali word vedana means that quality of every conscious experience – whether through sight, sound, smell, touch or mind – that is pleasant, unpleasant or somewhere in between. We get to know attachment and aversion, and the stress which is caused by them.

Feelings can be pleasant/comfortable, unpleasant/uncomfortable and neutral. If feelings are pleasant, we want to hold them. If they are unpleasant we want to get rid of them. If feelings are neutral, we get bored. The problem is that we identify with the feeling. When we’re not aware of our feelings, we are driven by them, pushed around. We react automatically, without really noticing our feelings. Later we see the true nature of feelings. In this practice we are getting closer to the original sensation. Everything begins with feelings, all the difficult mind states

that people get themselves into. The closer you are able to get to the original sensation, the more clearly you can see it. We feel more fully, we are more intimate with feeling without being tyrannized by them, pushed by them.

Breathing with the Mind

The third focus of mindfulness, observing the mind, is one of the most difficult to practice. Mindfulness takes the energy out of our mind states, so that they arise but no longer have so much power to push us around. We are learning to observe these states in a friendly way, instead of identifying with them, resisting them, or rejecting them. We change our mind from a battlefield, where we are always fighting these states, or getting lost in them, to a place of peaceful coexistence.

Breathing with Wisdom

Included in this category are the five hindrances to liberation, the six senses, the seven enlightenment factors and the four noble truths. In Potential Project, we focus directly on the wisdom investigating into dissatisfaction, impermanence and emptiness.

Suggested reading on this topic:

“Minding Closely: the Four Applications of Mindfulness” by Alan Wallace.

“Breath by Breath: The Liberating Practice of Insight Meditation” by Larry Rosenberg.

“The Four Foundations of Mindfulness” by U. Silananda

“The Experience of Insight” by Joseph Goldstein.

“Transformation and Healing: Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness” by of Thich Nhat Hanh.