CHAPTER 2

Leading the Way: Enhancing Five Controlling Faculties

So now I will go,
I will go on into the struggle,
This is to my mind delight;
This is where my mind finds bliss.
—Sutta Nipāta[38]

While sipping a cup of tea one afternoon, I found an apt quote by Virginia Woolf printed on the tea bag label: "To enjoy freedom, we have to control ourselves." There is an important link between freedom and control. Self-esteem and confidence are necessary to stabilize attention in meditation, and these arise out of self-control. As you stop resisting the fact that some things are pleasurable and other things are painful and cease diverting energy by trying to accumulate pleasant experiences and avoid unpleasant ones, you will discover an untapped potential to make significant change in your life. In other words, when you learn to control your mind, you will discover the freedom to live with ease in the midst of things that are beyond your control. The Buddha taught, "When this concentration is thus developed, thus well-developed by you, then wherever you go, you will go in comfort. Wherever you stand, you will stand in comfort. Wherever you sit, you will sit in comfort. Wherever you lie down, you will lie down in comfort."[39] An effective synthesis of concentration and

mindfulness will enable you to live in comfort throughout life—even as the body ages, the economy fluctuates, and life unfolds.

Five particular faculties lead the mind in the development of concentration, mindfulness, and insight. These five are sometimes called controlling factors, spiritual powers, or spiritual faculties—both beginning and experienced meditators rely on them. They are faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. These factors gauge and control the development of the spiritual life, and when highly refined they are potent attributes providing power for the spiritual path. The Pāli term for a controlling function is *indriya,* which refers to "the act of ruling by rulers." Analogous to the way effective governance protects a society from corruption and internal strife through the rule of law, you exercise control or leadership over your own mind through the cultivation of these five mental factors. These faculties balance attention so that the mind is well directed, orderly, and not overpowered by adventitious defilements; they sustain the power that we need to make progress on the path. If you find it difficult to stabilize the deep concentration of jhāna, you might work more directly to reinforce these five controlling faculties. If your jhāna absorptions weaken and crumble before you intend to emerge, you might examine and fortify these indispensable faculties.

A discussion of each of these five controlling factors follows.

Faith *(saddhā)*

When you open a box of jigsaw puzzle pieces, you trust that everything that is present is necessary, and everything that is necessary is present. You can likewise trust that you possess the basic abilities needed to concentrate the mind. No doubt you will need to bring forth persistent effort and practice diligently. If you live a complex and crowded lay life, some simplification and solitude may be needed. But what is required is already present in this human life. The willingness to place your heart upon your meditation object, and have faith in the unfolding of concentration and insight, launches this journey. Like a spider sailing out on a thin thread, you venture into practice, not demanding a familiar landing

place. Boldly engaging in the practice will develop the path until you realize for yourself the great peace of the liberated mind.

Classical Buddhist teachings describe faith *(saddhā)* as bearing the characteristic of trusting; it gives us the confidence to set forth in our practice. Faith manifests as clarity and resolution. The traditional symbol of faith is a magical gem that when dropped into water has the power to cause all impurities to settle to the bottom, producing pure, clear sparkling water to enjoy. Faith can purify the mind, leaving experience clear and sparkling. Faith settles doubt and agitation, leaving the mind ready to apply effective and cohesive effort. In order to attain jhāna, you will need conviction in the practice, clarity regarding the object, and diligence to continue even when the meditation becomes challenging. Faith is indispensable.

Faith, in a Buddhist context, is not a mystical quality. It is a mental factor that is remarkably practical and functions in relationship to the other four spiritual faculties. Faith does not deify Buddha. Faith in the Buddha, rather, inspires us to make the necessary effort to awaken. There is a deep confidence that since he, a human being, awakened to the peace of nibbāna and taught the way, therefore, we can follow the instructions and realize liberation ourselves. Trust the value of the goal, the efficacy of the methods, and the worthiness of your endeavor. Knowing that generations of Buddhist practitioners have succeeded in this practice, confidently place your heart upon your meditation object.

In meditation you may not perceive instant results, but you might see the fruit of the practice gradually. Some people learn fast, others learn more slowly, but speed of attainment is not an important criterion of success. The Buddha compared the progress of disciples to the rates at which camphor, dry wood, or wet wood burn. Just as these substances will all eventually burn, every meditator will eventually develop concentration. There is no need to compare your progress to that of others—this is not a race for jhāna and there is no definitive timeline for completion. Faith in the practice can keep you diligently plodding along, wearing away hindrances, and burning up the defilements, as you gradually develop mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

The type of concentration needed for jhāna can develop quickly for some students; for most, though, it is a slow and gradual process. Likened to the lumberjack whose toil slowly wears an imprint of his hand into the handle of his ax, our efforts will, bit by bit, have an effect. The lumberjack cannot say which day the handle became truly worn to his hand, but there is no doubt that his efforts have made it that way. You may not be able to say in which sitting you overcame the alluring seduction of sloth and torpor, or at which moment you secluded the mind from distracting fantasies, and yet your effort has the effect of wearing away the defilements and hindrances.[40] It is a natural law that actions have effects; even if your development is not as rapid as you would like, progress occurs through meditation.

If your faith is weak and you are faced with pain or difficulties, doubt can arise. You might wonder if you can really do this practice. You might wonder if you will ever attain jhāna. If conviction slackens, you will need to encourage and inspire yourself. Allowing attention to sink into the meditation object requires a yielding, trusting steadiness. If you don't trust the practice or your direction, you will remain preoccupied with superficial speculation—criticizing, comparing, anticipating, conceptualizing, and analyzing the meditation before it has matured. If the cohesive force of conviction weakens, then endeavor to strengthen your faith.

Although faith is indispensable, it is also vulnerable to error. The Buddhist tradition distinguishes between verified faith, which is confirmed through your own experience, and "bright faith," which is merely aroused from an outside source. Bright faith (sometimes called blind faith) has valuable inspirational properties, but it can be feeble and will not sustain us through obstacles. Verified faith, on the other hand, stands the test of investigation and is not diminished by criticisms. This deeper level of conviction is born out of wise consideration. Because conviction has been confirmed through discernment and personal experience, you can trust it, even when life is hard or pain racks the body. Gradually, by experiencing the benefits of concentration and insight first hand, you will gain confidence that you have the capacity to endure pain with equanimity, that you are able to let go of destructive habits, and that

you are worthy of the joy of a deeply tranquil mind. You will test the teachings in your own experience. As you grow and develop, your faith will strengthen. When faith is mature, doubts and questions subside. Energies then focus easily on the task at hand. Eventually, trust grows to a level that merits the designation of a controlling faculty and ushers the mind into deeply settled states.

Enhancing Faith with Recollections

One traditional tool to enhance faith is to contemplate objects that are worthy of trust. Reflect on what is worthy to know, such as the four noble truths, the path of release, the law of causes and effects. Reflect on what is worthy to practice, such as kind and compassionate deeds, honesty, generosity, renunciation, patience, integrity, and perseverance in meditation. Reflect on the people who practice sincerely and successfully.

Reflective meditations can quickly dispel the little agitations that arise in the course of cultivating the mind, thereby soothing unrest, enhancing tranquility, and bringing joy, brightness, and buoyancy to the mind. To develop these contemplations, focus on a subject worthy of respect and continuously dwell with that lovely notion. There are six traditional reflections incorporated into concentration practice; namely, recollections of the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha (community), virtue, generosity, and heavens. Two of these are illustrated below.

→ Meditation Instruction 2.1
Recollection of the Buddha

Of the six traditional reflections, recollection of the Buddha incorporates most of the qualities highlighted by the other five. Therefore meditators may favor this recollection, focusing one at a time on admirable qualities that the Buddha possessed. Begin by looking at a Buddha image of which you are fond. Then close your eyes and visualize the image. As you focus your attention upon that mental image of Buddha, reflect on a particularly admirable quality possessed by the Buddha. Choose just one attribute at a time—perhaps his extraordinary wisdom, that he discovered the path to nibbāna,

that through countless lifetimes he diligently cultivated wholesome qualities, or that he was a man of integrity who spoke the truth. Allow the contemplation of the perfection of Buddha's conduct, virtue, and knowledge to brighten your mind with delight and happiness.

Meditation Instruction 2.2
Reflection on Virtue and Generosity

You might explore reflective practices with the combined contemplation of virtue and generosity. First, reflect on the spiritual potency of these qualities in general; consider the benefits associated with virtuous and generous acts. Second, think of specific virtuous deeds or generous actions that you have personally performed, and allow attention to dwell on these thoughts. Third, sense that virtue supports your attention, providing a current of joyful wholesome energy that upholds consciousness, making your mind worthy of the happiness of concentration. Sustain the contemplation, repeatedly turning virtuous and generous thoughts over in your mind to massage away underlying feelings of doubt, trepidation, and stinginess.

Energy and Effort *(viriya)*

The faculty of effort has the function of consolidating and reinforcing the mind. It supports and drives the required mental faculties to accomplish the task of concentrating on your meditation object. Effort, however, isn't just a matter of trying harder, for if you are always striving, you may find yourself fatigued rather than strengthened. Supported by faith, the skillful application of effort brings an energetic engagement with meditation that leads to greater mindfulness. Balanced effort is both fully committed and deeply relaxing.

Although it is possible to strive too forcefully, I more frequently see students procrastinating in their meditation practice, inhibiting the complete engagement that would carry the mind into absorption.

Laziness, hesitancy, and partial commitment divert precious energy. There is so much that you actually can do to bring peace into your life. People often underestimate the amount of energy drained by habits, energy that could otherwise be tapped as a resource and strength. As the Buddha exhorted in his final teaching: "All conditioned things are of a nature to decay. Work out your liberation with diligence."[41] Wise and heartfelt persistence nurtures a balance of effort and ease as you give your whole heart and mind to the practice.

Total Dedication

In what ways do you offer less than 100 percent dedication to awakening?

Learn what drains and diminishes your effort. Notice the effect of daily habits and entertainments on your meditation. Observe the effects that watching TV, engaging in gossip, or surfing the Web might have on your concentration. If you discover that an activity increases distraction or reduces your energy, you can do something different—engage in more supportive pursuits. Confront any obstacles that sap your strength and determination for practice.

Enhancing Effort: A Tiger's Patience, a Spider's Diligence

Tigers are powerful and patient hunters. They are well adapted to pounce on their prey, but only from relatively short distances—they must wait patiently for prey to get close before striking. Naturalists have discovered that tigers succeed in less than one out of every twenty attempts at the hunt; they need forbearance to keep trying without discouragement. You too need patience to keep making the effort, to continue returning to your meditation object, even when it seems redundant and nothing

appears to be happening. There may be periods that are calm to the point of dullness and others that are excruciatingly restless. Meditation will not always be exciting or blissful, but a skillful meditator will apply ardent resolve and open ease, diligently continuing to practice.

In the early 1990s, NASA sent a spider into space in an experiment on the effects of zero gravity on web building.[42] Without her body weight as a guide, the spider wove misshapen webs for the first three days. On the fourth day, she spun a near perfect web. Like web-spinning, jhāna does not need perfect conditions, but it does require diligence. You may not enter jhāna in your first attempt, or your first retreat, but like spiders, you will learn if you just keep trying.

Skillful Effort Is "Just Enough"

Effort is not a static quality. You can't rely upon a single decision to be aware and expect that to bring calm or insight. Skill is needed to adjust the quality and quantity of your effort in each meditation session. Like a well-tuned instrument, your effort should be neither too tight nor too loose.[43]

The ability to adjust the quality and quantity of effort is an important meditation skill. For thousands of years teachers have used daily life examples to describe the intuitive adjustments that we make as our attention meets the meditation object. Balanced effort is compared to the way surgery pupils train to use a scalpel by cutting on a lotus leaf that is floating in a dish of water. An arrogant student may cut it in two or submerge it with overconfident, pushy, and forceful energy. A fearful student is too afraid to touch it and will not make the cut. But a student who applies balanced effort makes a precise and careful scalpel stroke on the leaf.

Similarly, a zealous skipper may decide to hoist his sail in a high wind and so send his ship adrift. A hesitant skipper may decide to lower his sail in a light wind and so will not navigate the waters. But "one who hoists full sails in a light wind, takes in half his sails in a high wind, and so arrives safely at his desired destination"[44] demonstrates the correct application of effort. As the *Visuddhimagga* states:

Adjusting the Quality of Effort

Notice in your meditation how much effort it takes to bring attention to meet the breath. If your energy is low, how does the attention respond? If there is too much effort, how do you recognize that force of striving? Experiment by first reducing the effort, then intensifying the meditation with more vigorous effort. What is the result of each adjustment? When is a strong and powerful energy needed, and when is a light touch more appropriate?

To consume a meal, you must apply the right amount of effort for your fork to pierce a potato. If you exert too much force, the fork will smash through the potato. If there is a deficiency of energy, the potato will not be firmly gripped and could slip off the fork and mess up your clothes. Notice how naturally you adjust the application of strength in daily tasks, and consider what amount of effort is required to settle the mind on the breath.

> Just as with these similes, so too . . . one bhikkhu forces his energy, thinking "I shall soon reach absorption." Then his mind lapses into agitation because of his mind's overexerted energy and he is prevented from reaching absorption. Another who sees the defect in overexertion slacks off his energy, thinking, "What is the absorption to me now?" Then his mind lapses into idleness because of his mind's too lax energy and he too is prevented from reaching absorption. Yet another who frees his mind from the idleness even when it is only slightly idle and from agitation when only slightly agitated . . . with balanced effort, reaches absorption. One should be like this last named.[45]

Four Applications of Energy/Effort

The Buddha described four kinds of effort, each of which has an important function in practice: (1) the effort to avoid or prevent unwholesome states that have not yet arisen; (2) the effort to abandon unwholesome states if they have arisen; (3) the effort to cultivate wholesome states that have not yet arisen; and (4) the effort to maintain wholesome states that have already arisen.

1. *The effort to avoid or prevent unwholesome states that have not yet arisen*. To prevent relapse, an alcoholic may spend the evening at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting rather than a local bar. To avoid sloth and torpor, a meditator may begin the meditation in an upright posture rather than reclining in bed. Using concentration practice, you prevent the arising of hindrances by occupying your attention with the breath.

   You can also avoid unwholesome states by learning from others' mistakes. The *Visuddhimagga* suggests that when seeing an unprofitable state in someone else, you may strive, thinking, "I shall not behave as he has done in whom this state has now arisen, and this state will not arise in me."[46] Thus you can circumvent many common errors by observing others.

2. *The effort to abandon unwholesome states if they have arisen*. Anytime you notice that aversion, ill will, greed, lust, doubt, restlessness, laziness, or any unwholesome state has arisen, you have a choice—you can entertain that state or abandon it. When you focus your attention in meditation, you have abandoned all other objects to attend to the simple perception of your meditation object. When your attention wanders off the meditation object, you can practice letting go of distraction. In daily activities, notice where your attention dwells and steer it away from patterns that disrupt clarity or happiness.

3. *The effort to cultivate wholesome states that have not yet arisen*. The Buddha encouraged his disciples to examine the mind and cultivate

wholesome states, day and night. This practice develops many wholesome states such as loving-kindness, generosity, compassion, equanimity, wise attention, insight, happiness, tranquility, concentration, and the five factors that are the focus of this chapter—faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

Cultivating Wholesome States

Choose a quality that you would like to develop. Decide how you will remind yourself of that quality and what you will do to strengthen it. Create simple daily projects for yourself. For example, if you wish to cultivate good will, you might remind yourself of loving-kindness by taping a note with a phrase such as *May you be happy and well* on the bathroom mirror and resolve to recite the phrase as you comb your hair each day. If you'd like to strengthen concentration, you might decide to forsake television and movies, and reduce newspaper reading, in order to add a little more time for meditation each day. If you want to refine honesty, you might carry a small notebook and write down every exaggeration, white lie, deception, or inaccurate statement to discover how dishonesty creeps into your speech.

Decide what you'd like to improve, and actually do something about it. Apply your effort.

4. *The effort to maintain wholesome states that have already arisen*. Once you have experienced a flicker of calmness, how do you nourish its continuance? When you have done a generous action, do you reflect on it to allow the motivation to mature? After you have cleared your mind of the hindrances, how do you maintain that purity? Once you have experienced jhāna, do you maintain access to deep tranquility

for the next sitting meditation, the next day, and throughout your life? The ability to maintain wholesome states is a subtle and essential mode of effort for jhāna practitioners. Students sometimes experience a brief immersion in jhāna, but then wander about with senses unrestrained, sabotaging the gains they have made. Once jhāna has been established, a gentle yet steady application of interest and energy is required to maintain the concentration. You can develop a continuity of attention, not only in the sitting meditations, but also throughout the day. Just as a young pregnant woman would consider the well-being of her baby while going about her activities—protecting it from harm while she worked, thinking of it while sitting, considering its nourishment while eating—a wise meditator will guard the meditation object in all activities and at all times.[47] For instance, if you are using the breath as your meditation object, also bring awareness to the breath as you walk, eat, bathe, and work. Gently but consistently nurture your contemplation throughout daily life, and then intensify that focus during formal sitting periods.

Wise effort is a simple development toward what is fruitful and away from what brings suffering. A Tibetan proverb says, "With a stout heart a mouse can lift an elephant." At times you will need courage, commitment, and a stout heart as you apply wise effort to prevent or abandon unwholesome states and to cultivate or maintain wholesome states.

Determination to Reach the Goal

You will only succeed if you apply yourself toward your goals: "Whatever wholesome states there are, they are all rooted in diligence, converge upon diligence, and diligence is reckoned the best of them all."[48] The Buddha had great strength of determination. He remarked:

> Two things, O monks, I came to know well: not to be content with good states of mind so far achieved, and to be unremitting in the struggle for the goal. Unremittingly, indeed, did I struggle, and I resolved: "Let only my skin, sinews, and bones remain; let the flesh and blood in my body dry up; yet there

Arousing Energy When You Feel Lax

1. Articulate and reflect upon your intention, purpose, and aim.
2. When you sit for meditation, straighten your spine and maintain an upright posture.
3. Quickly recognize dullness, laziness, or sleepiness as forms of suffering, and dispel them as instinctively as you would withdraw your hand from a flame.
4. Make a clear decision to be awake and energetic. Instruct yourself to stop wandering and pull your energy together, as you energetically lift your mind up to the meditation object.
5. Reflect on death to rouse spiritual urgency. No one has the luxury to procrastinate.
6. Tap the energy of rapture and joy. Delight that you have the opportunity to practice meditation.
7. If dullness threatens to overtake your meditation, open your eyes, roll your eyeballs for a moment, and take a deep breath and hold it before letting it slowly release. If sleepiness frequently overcomes you during meditation, then stretch, walk, or do some other physical activity before you sit in meditation.

shall be no ceasing of energy till I have attained whatever can be won by manly strength, manly energy, manly effort!" … Through diligence have I won enlightenment, through diligence have I won the unsurpassed security from bondage.[49]

Strong determination is needed to turn away from the sensual sphere and enter jhāna. Without this mental energy, concentration would be impossible. Let nothing deter your resolve. Make your focus unwavering, entertain no sidetracks in your pursuit of liberation.

Mindfulness *(sati)*

Meditation teachers use a variety of terms to describe mindfulness, awareness, attention, and concentration. Some use strongly directive language to describe mindfulness, such as "penetrative attention," "attention that is thrust upon an object," or "awareness that sinks into the object." Other teachers describe mindfulness as a "receptive, relaxed, nonjudgmental observation," and reserve the more forceful language for descriptions of concentration.

Mindfulness is a mental factor that occurs in conjunction with a cluster of associated mental factors. This ensemble of factors creates the state of heightened attention that we generally call "being mindful," in which circumstances, interrelationships, patterns, and objects that are occurring in the mind and body are seen clearly. Whether attention is focused on a fixed object such as the occurrence of the breath, or directed to observe changing sensory phenomena—for example, following the movement of the belly as it rises and falls with each breath, or observing changing emotional responses—mindfulness is the factor that prevents attention from wandering off the chosen object.

Mindfulness does not permit superficiality; it manifests as the direct confrontation with the object of perception. Its function is to prevent confusion and to consistently remember the object of perception, thus enabling attention to sink deeply into a penetrative awareness of the object. You are mindful when you remember to pay attention, and you are unmindful when you are lost in a cloud of associative thinking and forgetfulness. Mindfulness arises in conjunction with all wholesome states; it is not present in unwholesome states such as greed or hatred.

We cannot neatly separate the development of concentration and mindfulness, practicing one on Tuesday and the other on Friday.

Mindfulness is needed for concentration to develop into jhāna, and concentration is needed for mindfulness to sharpen and mature. The development of mindfulness not only precedes jhāna by clearing away hindrances and recollecting the meditation object, but the factor of mindfulness is found in every jhāna state.[50] While absorbed in jhāna, you will not be spaced out in relaxed trancelike states or float off in a cloud of bliss. Quite the contrary, in jhāna mindfulness is pure, continuous, and highly refined.

Mindfulness serves as the guardian of both the mind and the meditation object. The Buddha encouraged meditators to use mindfulness as protection from the dangers of sensual desire, craving, anger, arrogance, and any form of delusion.[51] Guard your mind with mindfulness, and cultivate mindfulness by remembering your meditation object. If you are developing present-moment attention, you can remember to be present with things as they are. If you are struggling to overcome hindrances, you can keep watch for any hint of obstruction. If you are mindful of the breath, you permit nothing to divert your attention. Try to not forget what you are doing. Become sensitive to what you are experiencing. Mindfulness is absolutely essential for the clear observation of things as they are.

Four Foundations of Mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna)

The Buddha identified four foundations of mindfulness: body, feeling tone, mental states, and objects of mind.

Mindfulness of body includes awareness of posture—whether sitting, standing, reclining, or moving. You can develop mindfulness and clear comprehension not only when you sit still, close your eyes, and focus on a meditation object, but also while engaged in any activity: brushing your teeth, eating, talking, walking, driving, sweeping the floor, dialing the telephone, typing, urinating, folding laundry, solving a puzzle, watching a child play. Maintain a continuity of mindfulness of the body by focusing on the breath in all your activities. The consistent awareness of this basic expression of breath will support the calming and concentrating of attention, and facilitate a rapid development of concentration with the meditation subject of breath.

The second foundation, mindfulness of feeling tone, refers to a bare impression of the pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality of any present experience. This "feeling" is an initial impression, not an elaborate emotional response to that impression of pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality. When you are not mindful of feeling tones, you might grasp what you find pleasant, push away what you experience as unpleasant, or space out for neutral experience. Mindfulness of feeling can free you from the agitation that comes with the push and pull of desire and aversion. An untrained mind reacts for or against the feeling tone, but when mindfulness arises you will remain present and attentive with any feeling without being compelled by attraction, fear, or repulsion. When mindfulness of feeling is developed, your orientation to experience shifts—you will begin to understand feeling as an opportunity to develop a stable equanimous presence, free of the burden of accumulating ever more pleasant sensations and avoiding painful ones.

Mindfulness of mental states, the third foundation, directs attention to the mind as it is colored by emotions such as love, joy, anger, hatred, interest, boredom, tranquility, and fear. Become sensitive and aware of mental phenomena without indulging or wallowing in emotional states. Don't take mental states personally—just notice what is present and what is absent. Any time you notice that your attention is entangled in a story, let go of the thoughts and notice the quality of the mind instead. Sometimes you will find restless agitation and although you try to return to your meditation object, a moment later the attention slides off again. Keep trying. Mindfulness grows with repetitive practice. When mindfulness becomes strong, you will calmly observe the inner workings of the mind. Each jhāna will sport a distinctive degree and quality of happiness, interest, and equanimity. Notice the dominant flavor of each state; remain mindful and understand fully what is occurring.

The fourth foundation is mindfulness of mental objects, which includes an awareness of the functions of mental states. Now you may observe how desire functions as a hindrance, how faith functions as a spiritual ally, how concentration supports insight, and how craving causes suffering. As your application of mindfulness extends beyond the mere ability to return to your meditation object, you may notice

the context, connections, interactions, causal relationships, and functions of mental states. This fourth foundation of mindfulness promotes a dynamic understanding of phenomena, how things arise and interact, and how they support or obstruct the development of the mind.

Clear Comprehension (sampajañña)

The development of right mindfulness is often combined with clear comprehension or full understanding. With mindfulness *(sati)* and clear comprehension/full understanding *(sampajañña)* established, the meditator maintains clarity regarding four aspects of every endeavor: (1) clarity regarding the purpose, (2) clarity regarding the suitability, (3) clarity regarding the proper domain, and (4) clarity regarding the undeluded perception of the activity concerned.[52]

To highlight these four modes of clear comprehension, when you perform an action, first consider if the action is aligned with your aim. Ask yourself: *Is this act likely to support a desirable result?* In the case of meditation, consider if your approach has the possibility to increase concentration and insight, and to reduce suffering. We do not meditate to indulge in bliss or accumulate personal powers; the purpose is to realize liberating insight that will transform a fundamental experience of suffering in life. Clear comprehension of the purpose is the basis for making wise choices.

Second, become aware of the broader context that surrounds an action. Ask yourself: *Is the action appropriate to the current conditions?* In the case of meditation, consider the appropriateness of external conditions such as timing and environment, and internal conditions such as your health and mental state. For example, it might not be appropriate to enter jhāna while the fire alarm is warning of danger, when a child needs food, or in an attempt to deny painful emotions such as grief.

Third, you can consider the domain, range, or extent of your activity. The Pāli term *(gocara)* is the same word used to describe a pasture or field in which a cow might graze. It implies the field that attention dwells within or the range of perceptions that occupy attention. How large a pasture do you give to your attention, and does that range support your aim? For instance, when developing jhāna using the breath

you will intentionally restrict the focus to the breath at the area near the nostrils—whenever the mind wanders off quickly bring the attention back to the breath. Insight practices emphasize the contemplation of changing phenomena—although there are a multitude of objects for vipassanā meditation, we shall focus on a range of formations and contemplate a set of specific characteristics. The scope of your awareness should support your purpose and be appropriate to the conditions that are present.

At one retreat center I volunteered to assist the cooks as part of a team of vegetable choppers; we silently washed, peeled, and chopped piles of vegetables each morning. A new participant at the retreat center joined the team and was given his first task of squeezing six lemons. Dedicated to his mindfulness practice he carefully washed, cut, squeezed, and deseeded the lemons, diligently bringing mindful awareness to each sensation and movement. After twenty minutes he had successfully squeezed only two lemons, after thirty minutes he had only partially completed the third lemon. The cooks looked on aghast and lobbied the managers of the retreat center to reassign him to a different department; the rest of the veggie chopping team put in overtime preparing the mountain of vegetables that were piling up on the counters all around the lemon-squeezing retreatant. Perhaps his concentration and mindfulness were admirable, but clear comprehension of the purpose of the task, the suitability of his pace, and the field of his attention was distorted. Actions must be appropriate to the conditions—sometimes that will require quick movement, and other times you will have the luxury of slowing down.

And fourth, consider if you have an accurate view of your activity. Have you embellished the perception of your meditation subject with fantasy, desire, hope, expectation, or pride? Is the meditation experience a basis for self-grasping, I-formations, or conceit? When your practice finally culminates in insight, you will fully understand phenomena as they are actually occurring; you will experience things free of the delusion that distorts phenomena into objects of attachment. These four aspects of clear comprehension—clarity regarding the purpose, suitability, domain, and undeluded perception—enhance clarity in every

activity, including the simple activity of sitting in silence observing the breath.

Concentration *(samādhi)*

The mental factor of one-pointedness, with its characteristic of nondistraction, is sometimes used synonymously with the term *concentration*. Mental factors, such as one-pointedness, decision, energy, and mindfulness, work together to drive attention toward the object of meditation, yoke the attention to the chosen object, and consolidate the associated mental factors into a state we commonly recognize as "being concentrated." Concentration, as a controlling faculty, refers to wholesome states in which many factors come together to create a stable unification of attention with the object of perception. It is not restricted to the deep states of jhāna, but it can refer to the mental collectedness that occurs when we investigate changing phenomena.[53]

Although you may emphasize either deep concentration or dynamic investigation at different moments in your practice, the calm, tranquil, and concentrated mode of apprehending an object goes hand in hand with the dynamic, investigative, and insightful mode of engagement. When describing one who correctly practices his teachings, the Buddha stated, "these two things—serenity and insight—occur in him yoked evenly together."[54]

In Buddhist practice, focused attention is far more than a convenient antidote to the painful patterns of anxiety, distraction, and restlessness, and it is more than just a steppingstone for higher attainments. When the Buddha announced, "I shall teach you noble right concentration with its supports and its requisites,"[55] he did not describe specific meditation techniques such as counting breaths or repeating thoughts of kindness. The Buddha described this unification of mind as synonymous with the fulfillment of the noble eightfold path, and as inseparable from right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness. Hence, right concentration is not measured by just the depth of the concentrated state, but by the purpose for which it is attained, and the use to which it is put.[56]

The noble eightfold path lays out a set of integrated factors, each mutually supportive of the others. Clear understanding and intention regarding the purpose of the path provide a wise perspective; careful speech, action, and livelihood create a purity that permits the mind to rest at ease. The triad of effort or energy, concentration, and mindfulness is of particular interest to the meditator endeavoring to attain jhāna. When you focus your attention on a chosen object in meditation, concentration, energy, and mindfulness occur with a cluster of associated mental factors that together aid attention in dwelling consistently with that meditation object.

The mutual dependence and interaction of mindfulness, concentration, and effort are illuminated by the traditional story of three friends who enter a park together for a stroll.

> [The first friend] saw a champack tree in full blossom, but he could not reach the flowers by raising his hand. The second bent down for the first to climb on his back. But although standing on the other's back, he still could not pick them because of his unsteadiness. Then the third offered his shoulder [as support]. So standing on the back of the one and supporting himself on the other's shoulder, he picked as many flowers as he wanted and after adorning himself, he went and enjoyed the festival. And so it is with this. For these last three states beginning with right effort (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration), which are born together, are like the three friends who enter the park together. The object is like the champack tree in full blossom. Concentration, which cannot of its own nature bring about absorption by unification on the object, is like the man who could not pick the flower by raising his arm. Effort is like the companion who bent down, giving his back to mount upon. Mindfulness is like the friend who stood by, giving his shoulder for support.[57]

Well supported by effort and stabilized by mindfulness, concentration will successfully reach its aim.

Concentration is called a "profitable unification of mind";[58] it sustains a steadfast attention on the object and adds a powerful force to the observing capacity of mindfulness. Concentration is like the lens that magnifies and focuses sunlight to such a degree that it can ignite fire. The focused and continuous mindfulness of your meditation object will bring strength and intensity to your insight.

Concentration and the Four Jhānas

In the Discourses of the Buddha, the sequence of four material jhānas is frequently described as the defining feature of concentration:

> And what, bhikkhus, is the faculty of concentration? Here, bhikkhus, the noble disciple gains concentration, gains one-pointedness of mind, having made release the object. Secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, he enters and dwells in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by thought and examination, with rapture and happiness born of seclusion. With the subsiding of thought and examination, he enters and dwells in the second jhāna, which has internal confidence and unification of mind, is without thought and examination, and has rapture and happiness born of concentration. With the fading away as well of rapture, he dwells equanimous and, mindful and clearly comprehending, he experiences happiness with the body; he enters and dwells in the third jhāna of which the noble ones declare: "he is equanimous, mindful, one who dwells happily." With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous passing away of joy and displeasure, he enters and dwells in the fourth jhāna, which is neither painful nor pleasant and includes the purification of mindfulness by equanimity. This is called the faculty of concentration.[59]

In this passage, *right concentration* is defined as the experience of jhāna absorptions. Much of this book is devoted to cultivating these refined states of powerful concentration. But perhaps most importantly,

the training will apply your hard won concentration to elicit a direct and wise encounter with reality.

Wisdom *(paññā)*

Wisdom is the ability to clearly discriminate and discern the essence of things—an ability that develops out of sustained mindfulness and concentration. Wisdom illuminates the object of attention, like a lamp illuminates a cave. It transforms an ignorant or deluded way of relating to experience into a wise, clear, and lucid knowledge of reality. Like a skilled guide who, knowing the way through a dark forest, travels the forest paths without bewilderment and leads the way to emerge safely, wisdom is an indispensable faculty on the path of liberation.

At every level of the training, you will make choices based on whatever degree of wisdom you can muster. The Buddha said that thoughts can be divided into two classes, wholesome thoughts and unwholesome thoughts.[60] Unwholesome thoughts lead to an increase in unprofitable states, exacerbating sensual desire, ill will, or cruelty. Wholesome thoughts promote profitable states such as renunciation, loving-kindness, and compassion. The Buddha said, "Whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his mind. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of sensual desire, he has abandoned the thought of renunciation to cultivate the thought of sensual desire, and then his mind inclines to thoughts of sensual desire."[61] Consider what your thoughts cultivate, and choose, based on reasoned reflection, whether that thought ought to be entertained or abandoned. When you discover that certain thoughts lead to harm, you may wisely choose to let them go.

The Buddha did not merely instruct his disciples to let go of harmful thoughts, but he also taught that there was value in letting go of all preoccupation with thought, even thoughts of kindness, wisdom, or compassion. He examined wholesome thoughts in his mind and considered:

> This does not lead to my own affliction, or to others' affliction, or to the affliction of both; it aids wisdom, does not

> cause difficulties, and leads to Nibbāna. If I think and ponder upon this thought even for a night, even for a day, even for a night and a day, I see nothing to fear from it. But, with excessive thinking and pondering I might tire my body, and when the body is tired, the mind becomes disturbed, and when the mind is disturbed, it is far from concentration. So I steadied my mind internally, quieted it, brought it to singleness, and concentrated it. Why is that? So that my mind should not be disturbed.[62]

Although there is nothing wrong with wholesome thoughts, the Buddha chose to develop a calm, quiet, and still mind—a mind absorbed in jhāna. You may not be obsessed by lust, hatred, or cruelty; usually we are

Two Kinds of Thought

Observe your thoughts today and categorize them according to the root intention behind each thought. Make two lists—one for the wholesome and one for the unwholesome. If you notice a thought that is fueling anger, recognize the aversive state at the root, and add it to your unwholesome list. If you notice a thought of compassion, recognize the wholesome root of non-cruelty, and add it to your wholesome list. When you notice impatience, see the underlying force of aversion. When you think about dessert, feel the force of greed. When confused, arrogant, or hypocritical thoughts arise, notice the root of delusion. And when thoughts of impermanence, causes and effects, and the value of honesty intrigue you, notice the wholesome root of wisdom from which they spring. Track your thoughts throughout a day.

just preoccupied by innocuous but incessant stories and personal plans about our own lives. But until you discover your capacity to rest the mind, focused, clear and fully aware, jhāna will be impossible.

After you have calmed the distracted mind, attained jhāna, and emerged from the absorption, you will harness the power of the concentrated mind to discern ultimate mental and material phenomena in order to understand the causes of suffering and realize its ending.

A Powerful Mind

The five spiritual faculties discussed in this chapter—faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom—must not only be strongly developed, but also well balanced.[63] Together these five faculties produce a powerful mind. The Buddha said:

> Bhikkhus, so long as noble knowledge [wisdom] has not arisen in the noble disciple, there is as yet no stability of the [other] four faculties, no steadiness of the [other] four faculties. But when noble knowledge [wisdom] has arisen in the noble disciple, then there is stability of the [other] four faculties, then there is steadiness of the [other] four faculties.
>
> It is just as in a house with a peaked roof: so long as the roof peak has not been set in place, there is as yet no stability of the rafters, there is as yet no steadiness of the rafters; but when the roof peak has been set in place, then there is stability of the rafters, then there is steadiness of the rafters… In the case of a noble disciple who possesses wisdom, the faith that follows from it becomes stable; the energy that follows from it becomes stable; the mindfulness that follows from it becomes stable; the concentration that follows from it becomes stable."[64]

When the five faculties are fully developed each factor reinforces and supports each other factor, preparing the mind for success in jhāna and insight practices.

Meditation Instruction 2.3
Observing Long and Short Breaths

After you have observed the breath at the nostrils for some time as introduced in meditation instruction 1.1, you'll notice that some breaths are long and others are short. Observe each in-breath and each out-breath as they naturally occur; notice if each half breath is long or short. In order to determine if it is long or short, you must attend to the beginning and ending of each inhalation and each exhalation. You don't need to mentally recite the words *long* or *short,* nor would you precisely measure each breath. Don't alter the length of the breath. Let the breathing occur naturally and quietly; audible breathing usually indicates excessive control. Observe the breath itself—not the sensation on the skin, not the sound of its passing. Simply register the length to foster a continuity of attention from the beginning to the end of each breath.

If the breath seems to disappear, patiently continue directing your attention toward the spot it last appeared. Resist the temptation to make the breath coarser in order to observe it. Gradually, mindfulness will become refined enough to perceive the subtle breath.