

# Protocol-Free Meditation (With Wisdom and a Cup of Tea)

By Ben Alterman

*Conduit-makers guide the water;  
Fletchers straighten out the arrow-shaft;  
Carpenters plane the timber;  
Wise people seek to tame themselves.*

*Whatever a hater or an enemy may do to us,  
A misdirected mind will do us greater harm.  
Whatever a father, a mother, any relative or friend may do for us,  
A well-directed mind will do us greater service.*

*Verses paraphrased from the Dhammapada*

## PRELIMINARY INFORMATION

At the outset or in the course of every session, it is worthwhile to be aware, whether explicitly or implicitly, of our motivation for meditating, such as expressed in the verses above. Also, it is important to understand over time, with ever increasing clarity, the “focus” of our meditation, not so much as a rigid instruction set directing us to a destination, but, rather, as guidance to help us navigate in the direction of taming our mind. Understanding this is crucial to the practice: it is not just the destination for which we practice; in actuality, the challenges we contend with provide the grounds to acquire invaluable mental life skills.

The focus of this meditation is to settle our mind in an adaptive orientation toward reality, abide there for a while, and ultimately, to be and to remain satisfactorily at one with reality such as it is. To do so, we alternate between "contemplation," in which we develop adaptive insight into reality, and "non-discursive awareness" in which we apprehend emergent sensory and mental experiences with "equipoise" and "equanimity." Here is an explanation of these terms of art as they apply to this meditation.

In equipoise, our consciousness is alertly balanced between “scattering” and “sinking.” With scattering, at the extreme we become lost in a daydream and forget we are meditating. Short of that, we become distracted by trains of thought but after recognizing it, we regain meta-awareness. Short of that, scattering might consist of continual pop-up thoughts that we don't elaborate into trains of thought. At a more subtle level, even without discursive thoughts, scattering may consist simply of restlessness, a sense of "what's next," or even more subtly, a

tendency toward agitation or excitation. Conversely, with sinking, at the extreme, we fall asleep. Short of that, we become lethargic. Short of that, sinking might consist of brain fog or mental dullness. At a more subtle level, we may sink into a sort of entrancement or dazed tranquility.

In equanimity, our consciousness is at peace, moved by neither attraction nor aversion toward emergent experiences of the sensorium and mind. As sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings and thoughts emerge into awareness, we remain alert without clinging to, rejecting, or elaborating on what we are conscious of. We are conscious of every sensory and mental experience that emerges just as it presents to our awareness, without adding or subtracting anything. If we find ourselves reacting with attraction or aversion, we neutrally regard that reaction as just another emergent experience.

Thus, we can expect to commonly encounter these five misdirections in our meditation: lack of clarity in our focus, sinking, scattering, attraction and aversion. These misdirections are not obstacles per se. In the early stages of training our mind, managing them, in large part, is the meditation itself, similar to interacting with resistance in physical exercise, which is the productive focus of our reps.

The contents of protocol-free meditation are bi-modal, comprising epochs of non-discursive awareness alternating with contemplation. The synergy of alternating between non-discursive awareness and contemplation is enormously helpful in developing equipoise and equanimity.

## NON-DISCURSIVE AWARENESS

"Non-discursive awareness" is a rubric for consciousness resting in equipoise and equanimity as well as possible without ongoing internal commentary while various experiences emerge into awareness. In training the mind, it is crucial for it to become familiar with this mode of being. Greater familiarity engenders greater appreciation and access.

It can be helpful to encounter emergent experiences as instances of some category without elaborating their content. For instance, if we become aware of feeling depressed or anxious, we can simply recognize that experience as a feeling and be present to it for a while as such, without elaborating on it, then eventually find ourselves focused elsewhere, such as the sensation of warmth in our hands from holding a cup of hot tea, etc. Likewise, if we have a compelling pop-up thought, we can simply recognize it as an idea and leave it at that. Again, it is crucial that our minds learn to encounter experiences such as anxiety, depression, pain, pleasure, thoughts of disaster or of rapture etc., with equanimity and equipoise. Being impermanent, such experiences pass through the space of our

awareness, and by maintaining the stability of our meta-awareness as this occurs without elaborating on and pursuing or shunning such experiences, our attentional skills and agency are enhanced.

When meditating at ease in non-discursive awareness, we can sequentially focus on a diverse variety of visual fields, from the broadest field of vision to a small focal point and anything in between. Sometimes it may be satisfying to raise our line of sight; at other times it can be nice to keep it level, or lower it down the slant of our nose, or drop it to the ground. Sometimes, especially if we're beginning to become a little dull, it is stimulating to scan the horizon, gaze out at a vista or, in particular, up at the sky. At other times we might prefer less stimulation by gazing at some object such as a leaf or our cup of tea, etc. Similarly, we might stare for a while at a space between the leaves or branches of a tree, or at the texture and color of a wall, or a speck on the floor or window sill. We can allow our gaze to shift around, like a butterfly, landing on a flower and staying there for a while, then flitting about until it lands on another flower where it likewise stays for a while. We can also defocus or even close our eyes provided that this doesn't lead us to sink too far or put us to sleep.

Then again, we may come to ignore the visual field entirely and land our awareness on our breathing, its slow rise and fall, the sensation and satisfaction of drinking in the air with repeated or even just a few deep breaths, the gentle calm of some shallower breaths, and/or the quiescent concentration of suspending our breathing all together for a moment or two. Combining the senses, we can focus on our tea: the color, the warmth, the smell, the taste. Awareness can ride the motor movements of bringing the cup to our lips, sipping the liquid, rolling it across our tongue and swallowing. It can be pleasant but it doesn't need to be in order for us to cultivate the skill of focusing our awareness mindfully on our sensorium rather than being incessantly caught up in our thoughts.

We could listen to music, but the ambient soundscape would be better for this particular meditation since music tends to call the tune without helping us develop the skills we need to tame our mind. Music may be a valuable resource for us at other times, but since it tends to complement our mood with little conscious agency on our part, no resistance is afforded with which to exercise and strengthen our attentional skills. By contrast, if an annoying sound, like that of a leaf blower or a loud motorcycle accosts us, this provides the opportunity to develop impartiality, to counter-condition our preconceived reactivity. Then, when we eventually find the soundscape neutral again, we can appreciate it without having our consciousness coopted.

While engaged in non-discursive awareness we can choose to what we attend from moment to moment or, conversely, we can allow experiences to emerge spontaneously into our meta-awareness. In any case, while engaged in this practice, we seek to keep our consciousness in an observational, non-discursive mode as much as possible. As previously mentioned, by focusing our awareness on the sensorium we become familiar with a mode of being not incessantly caught up in trains of thought. Also, the variety of available sensory objects can help us achieve and maintain attentional equipoise by promoting stimulation or settling of our consciousness to counteract sinking and scattering.

Posture can also help. Whatever position we find comfortable at the beginning of our session will sooner or later become uncomfortable. At that point, we can exercise mind over matter by not minding, so that it won't matter so much. Conversely, we can shift our posture to make ourselves more comfortable again. If we are feeling a little dull, sitting more upright and slightly forward may help to counteract sinking. On the other hand, if we are somewhat restless, a more relaxed posture might help for a while. It is best to not remain in an uncomfortable position for too long as this can distract us from the more important psychological aspects of meditating and may condition us to resist meditation altogether. We may find that sitting cross legged with a straight spine can sometimes be beneficial, but we need not adhere religiously to any particular pose. We are the sole owner and beneficiary of our meditation. We should engage in it, leave it, and return to it as a friend, not a task master.

## CONTEMPLATION

Three parameters distinguish contemplation from ordinary thinking. The first parameter is "choice." During bi-modal meditation, when we begin to think rather than engage in non-discursive awareness, we let this be a matter of choice rather than the result of compulsive scattering and we let the subject of our contemplation be a matter of choice as well. The second parameter of contemplation is "editorial discretion." When our meta-awareness observes that the way we are thinking about whatever we are thinking about is distressing or distracting us without doing us any good, then we take some time to address the subject of our thoughts more adaptively or change our focus altogether. The third parameter of contemplation is "resolution"; i.e., we eventually conclude or pause our thinking and return to non-discursive awareness rather than compulsively continue from subject to subject like a run-on sentence.

Regarding choice, the ability to choose which thoughts to entertain and which to ignore is a valuable life skill. Throughout the day and evening adventitious thoughts continually pop into our minds. Strengthening the contemplative skill of

choosing to entertain or ignore pop-up thoughts helps us keep our minds more free to focus on worthwhile matters and helps save us from maladaptively stumbling into emotionally laden concerns with no resolution. Resolution in the process of contemplation provides the opportunity for engaging in non-discursive awareness again and the spaciousness thus afforded provides the opportunity for choice rather than run-on compulsivity with regard to entertaining further thoughts. The ability to settle our mind back down into non-discursive awareness from the excitation generated by thinking is a valuable life skill as well. The synergy of alternating between non-discursive awareness and contemplation regulated by choice and resolution enhances the development of these important life skills.

Regarding editorial discretion, without meta-awareness we become lost in dream-like narratives with little choice over where this may lead us. Thus, without meta-awareness and choice, our conditioning may land our mind helplessly in maladaptive fugues of anxiety, depression, anger, desires and/or fantasy masquerading as truth. Of course, an editor who gets too much in the way of an author will get fired. The editor of our contemplation, meta-awareness together with choice, steps in only occasionally to direct our thoughts toward the development of an adaptive orientation. In this regard, there are many resources that can contribute to adaptive insight, and chief among them is keeping in mind three universal characteristics of existence to contextualize our thoughts.

The three universal characteristics of existence which provide an adaptive context for contemplation are that: (1) every composite thing is impermanent and subject to entropy; (2) maladaptively apprehending any phenomenon results in suffering; and (3) all phenomena are devoid of own being. Understanding and giving consideration to characteristics #1 and #2 with regard to whatever we're thinking about promotes adaptive acceptance of reality. Finding an adaptive direction with which to orient our mind toward whatever we're thinking about through the gateway provided by characteristic #3 is the dynamic of wisdom.

The eye of wisdom sees whatever we experience as not existing on its own, but as dependent on other things such as the causes that produce it, the conditions that sustain its existence, the parts that comprise it, the sequence of which it is an instance, and the way in which we designate and attend to it. By contrast, the lens through which we ordinarily see our world can be called "identity view." This view of reality sees things as existing in and of themselves and these things that give this appearance of self-existence (including "myself") are the superficial bases to which our emotions attach. When contemplating our concerns, a view informed by wisdom rather than mere identity will take us beyond appearance

and emotion to the underlying bases (causes, conditions, parts, sequence, and designation) of our concerns. This provides a more adaptive direction in which to orient our mind during the process of contemplation.

Insights provided by various forms of psychotherapy, skills training, science and spirituality may also serve as resources for contemplative insight. The following instances are a few among innumerable examples. Psychodynamic insights can help us better understand our emotions. Cognitive insights can help us better understand our thinking processes. Behavioral insights can help us better understand our conditioning. Existential insights can help us better understand our values and motivations. Insights derived from social psychology can help us better understand many factors that impact perceptions. Empathic imagining (imagining how reality might appear through the lens of another person's perception) can help us interpersonally. Skills training can contribute to our agency. Neuroscience and medicine can inform us about impacts physical phenomena may have on our mind. Scientific findings can empirically inform our understanding of phenomena with predictive validity. Spirituality can orient us toward meaningfulness and our relationship with the big picture.

Contemplation as a component of protocol-free meditation does not always need to be weighty, especially if we are going to make the process positively self-reinforcing. Just as we are free to attend to a variety of sensory experiences in the non-discursive mode, we are also free to entertain a variety of subjects in the contemplative mode. We may sometimes find it helpful or satisfying to reflect on the virtue of some other person or their actions, things for which we are grateful, the wondrousness of the natural world and the beauty of various phenomena in it. We may also appreciate the beauty of creativity and enjoy engaging in creative thinking ourselves.

On a more personal level, if we wish to plan for a project, the day or the hours ahead, we are free to do so, but our editor will hopefully help us learn how to minimize any tension this may engender. Likewise, if we want to process times gone by, we can do so, but again, our editor will hopefully help us learn from and transcend any worry and regret this may evoke. If we feel the need to solve some problem then we can engage in contemplative analysis, but remember, the focus of bi-modal meditation is to settle our mind in an adaptive orientation toward reality, abide there for a while, and ultimately, to be and to remain satisfactorily at one with reality such as it is. This need not entail that we solve every problem or issue impacting us. Rather, it directs us to find an adaptive orientation with which we can develop equilibrium not only in the presence of what buoys us, but equally in the presence of those problems and issues that tilt us off balance. When the

wind or a wave tips a boat off balance, the boat's equilibrium is its self-righting capacity. The skills we develop by meditating in this way are meant to promote our mental equilibrium.

Thus, as mentioned earlier, when we find ourselves unsettled by our thoughts, we need to take responsibility for orienting adaptively toward whatever we're thinking about and/or shift our focus. This is where wisdom can be dynamically employed. It is imperative that we break through the enchantment that immerses our mind in conditioned narratives we apprehend as reality itself, like a dreamer lost in a dream. Even though we and the world at large may often not get what we want, or get what we don't want, or lose what we value, this is so for all the reasons that make it so. We as individuals possess whatever agency we may or may not have to make these things more as we would wish, but beyond that, it is maladaptive to apprehend our concerns with anxiety, despair, anger, and clinging to our ideas of what should exist rather than dealing as best we can with what does exist. There are many ways to designate an issue, but whatever map we employ is never the territory. Choosing how and to what we attend will determine where our thoughts and actions bring us. This is our responsibility as we engage in contemplation.

## A PROTOCOL-FREE PROCESS

With the information above serving as a context and reference, we can begin a session of protocol-free meditation. Since there is no strict protocol to follow, this can be awkward the first few times or so. However, in the long run, the freedom and flexibility this offers allows us to consistently make our sessions more pleasant and engaging over time. In general, we may need a half hour or 45 minutes at a minimum to meditate bi-modally with a cup of tea or some such. Actually, the beverage can serve as a variable timer for our session. We can sip it slowly and sporadically when we're having a good time and want to stretch the session out or we can drink it down if we feel the session has gone on long enough. In any case, it is worthwhile to carry the session through at least a couple of bi-modal meditation cycles alternating between non-discursive awareness and contemplation, then back again. If we're having a good time, this probably indicates that we are on the right track whereas if we're struggling too much, something may be amiss in our approach. It's important to learn how to make our meditation positively self-reinforcing. We'll know we have mastered this method when we can spend an hour or two, or even up to four hours meditating in this way without feeling the need to end our session, except that we need to get on with the rest of our life.

As we brew our tea or prepare some other beverage, we can begin to settle our consciousness by being mindfully present to the task at hand. Then, as we allow our prepared beverage to sit for a bit, we can begin to settle into non-discursive awareness of our body or our environment, or we can choose to entertain some train of thought, maybe after checking in with our editor (meta-awareness and choice) for good measure. Our mind has a mind of its own and doesn't want to be told how to be or what to do by anyone, not even ourselves. Our mind is like a spirited, wild horse, but a horse that can be tamed without breaking its spirit if we take a skillful approach. That's where the fundamental principles outlined above combined with our own creative engagement come into play. Once we have tamed our mind a bit, we'll really enjoy the ride.

## UNIFICATION

After many sessions, as we engage repeatedly in the process of protocol-free meditation, we will begin to enjoy the journey and find that the direction in which it takes us is unification of our mind. "Unification" here is a synonym for concentration or "samadhi" in the parlance of meditation. It could be considered a third mode of protocol-free meditation, but since it emerges as a consequence of the bi-modal process, it is presented here as a coda to the methodology rather than as a component of the method.

In this mode of concentrated awareness, there is no need for the internal discourse that occurs in the contemplative mode. Likewise, there is no need to manage our consciousness as we must while meditating at ease in the non-discursive mode. In this samadhi, conscious experience occurs in a non-dualistic flow, directly known and deeply understood with effortless equipoise and equanimity.

The experience of this in meditation may at first be rapturous. In any case, over time rapture subsides and confident equanimity takes precedence with an ongoing flow of pleasant and peaceful experiences. Continued abiding in this samadhi is meaningful, however, only in so far as it harmonizes our journey on the path and supports the unification of compassionate purpose and wisdom in our everyday life.