

Four Levels of Awareness, Four Ways to Practice

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Every Buddhist tradition has multiple levels of practice. Over time, as one's capacity in attention grows, it is possible to work more often at the higher levels. But our level of attention at any moment is influenced by external and internal conditions, so we find ourselves needing to work at the "lower" levels of practice when we encounter certain patterns, in certain situations or on certain days.

Level One: Rest in direct awareness of everything that is arising in experience

The highest level of attention allows you to rest in direct awareness. If you can, whatever arises, simply experience it fully, all the sensations, feelings, emotions and thoughts, without trying to control, block, or generate anything.

When certain sensations, feelings, or emotions are too intense, when they consistently distract your attention out of your body and away from the space around you, it can be helpful to maintain awareness of the entire field of experience. If your back muscles are tense or burning, focusing on the sensations can make them even more intense. Instead, try experiencing the painful sensations in the whole field of the body. Your back and shoulders are burning, but how do your feet, legs, and arms feel? One way to bring awareness to the whole body is to feel the soles of your feet, the palms of your hands, and the top of your head simultaneously. Whole-body awareness may allow you to experience the pain in your back muscles within a larger sphere of experience.

Direct awareness practices include mahamudra and dzogchen in the Tibetan tradition, shikantaza in the Zen tradition, bare attention and the four foundations of mindfulness in the Theravada, and shamatha without an object.

Level Two: Use an antidote to counteract or mitigate overwhelming sensations and emotions

You feel anxious, and it develops into intense fear, with tightness in your stomach, trembling, and sweaty palms. You've tried just experiencing all the sensations, emotions, and thoughts just as they are, but stories and emotions keep grabbing all your attention. Don't try to stop the sensations and feelings and thoughts, but try using the breath as an anchor, and slightly emphasize the exhalation to enhance the relaxing and calming effect of the breath. Feel the weight of your body on the floor, chair, or cushion. These calming and grounding techniques may give you a bit more stability and allow you to experience the sensations and feelings in attention.

You can also apply antidotes to balance intense emotions. If you are angry, counteract it with equanimity or lovingkindness if you can access those, or reflect on the suffering caused by anger. You're not suppressing the anger, but you're accessing counteracting emotions or using reflection to balance your bodymind.

Level Three: Bring in resources and energy to raise your capacity in attention

If neither direct awareness nor antidotes are sufficient to maintain stable attention, bring in additional energy and resources. This can range from getting practical advice from a teacher or fellow practitioner, to energy transformation practices such as prayer, guru yoga, or yidam practice. These raise energy "from outside" which becomes available to you.

Level Four: Avoid the trigger by changing your behavior or external circumstances

If someone is consistently upsetting your temper, and you are unable to work with your reactions in attention, take a break in the conversation, or avoid the person altogether for a while. If alcohol is an overwhelming trigger of addictive behavior, avoid situations where alcohol is available. If sitting for an hour brings up overwhelming sensations and emotions and derails your ability to experience what's arising in attention, cut your meditation session back to 45 minutes.

In practical terms, the boundaries between these levels of practice are not clear-cut even within a single meditation session. For instance, one may begin a session of mahamudra, which is a direct awareness practice, with guru yoga, which raises the level of energy and attention.

Habitually avoiding every difficult experience is not helpful, but letting reactive patterns run without attention just reinforces the patterns. As Ken McLeod says, the power of meditation comes from resting in stable attention. Regardless of how long you've been practicing, if you are working your edge, there will be times when you are not able to maintain stability with simple direct awareness. In the long run you'll come out ahead by using skillful means to balance, mitigate, or avoid situations that you cannot at present experience fully.