

# WAKE UP TO YOUR LIFE

Discovering the Buddhist  
Path of Attention

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HarperSanFrancisco  
*A Division of HarperCollinsPublishers*

sustaining. Trying too hard comes from a pattern of trying to control. The pattern comes from feeling separate from what you experience, and it prevents the development of self-sustaining attention.

### *Equanimity*

To go through the roadblock of trying too hard, rely on equanimity. Equanimity is the ability to let things be as they are. For instance, when a child grows up, her parents have to let go and trust that she has learned how to meet the challenges of life. Letting go and trusting are the essence of equanimity. Once you experience resting in attention with the breath, you must trust that resting with the breath in clear and stable attention is enough for attention to grow and become self-sustaining.

Active attention is not a balance between clarity and stability. It is a higher level of directed energy in which both clarity and stability are present. You move into the higher level of energy by holding both clarity and stability. You will feel the shift. When clarity and stability are both present, rest. Don't do anything more. Even when thoughts arise, if they do not disturb the clarity and stability, don't try to get rid of them. They won't stay long. When you feel the quality of attention decay (characterized by a loss of clarity or a loss of stability), apply the appropriate countermeasures. If the attention is clear and stable, however, just rest. Rest in attention and let the momentum of attention accumulate.

## WORKING WITH REACTIVE EMOTIONS

A husband and wife plan to go out to dinner. Because he has a lot of pressure at work, the man asks his wife to make reservations. Delayed by traffic, they arrive a little late and can't find a parking place. The husband starts to get upset, but his wife is unperturbed. She keeps driving around until a space opens up. By then, however, her husband is furious. A light rain starts to fall, and they must walk an extra block to get to the restaurant. Fortunately, their reservations hold, so they are soon seated. He knows he is overreacting but can't let go of it. She, however, can't understand why he's upset. They sit together, eating in stony silence.

Reaction is always based on past experience. Elements of any present situation resonate with the past and trigger habituated patterns that formed and developed on the basis of past experience. When patterns are triggered, attention goes out the window. What we see, what

we feel, and what we do are shaped by the complex interactions of conditioned patterns from the past.

When the husband later examined his reaction, he first identified how exasperated he felt because his wife hadn't arranged for parking in advance or at least had a backup plan. "That's what I would have done," he said. When asked why the lack of parking arrangements was so upsetting, he smugly replied that he always made sure that any eventuality was covered in at least two ways, a skill that served him well as a business manager. Further inquiry revealed that he really felt unsafe if anything was left to chance. His whole life was based on controlling outcomes as much as possible.

His pattern of control prevented him from appreciating that his wife had her own way of handling situations and that she was patient, resourceful, and flexible. Despite the fact that nothing had really gone wrong, his reaction to the lack of backup arrangements stopped him from enjoying the rest of the evening: He was a victim of his own reactive patterns.

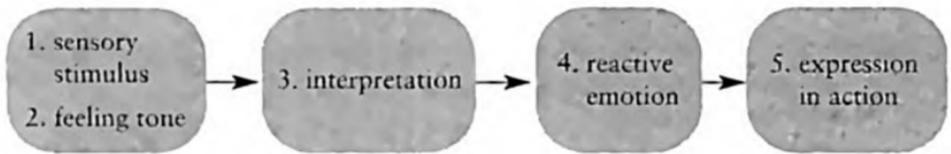
Reactive emotions play a big part in the way we experience life. Probably the most frequently asked question in meditation practice is "How do I use meditation to deal with emotions?" In subsequent chapters, specific techniques with which to dismantle reactive emotional patterns are explained. Here, the attention developed in meditation practice is used to step out of reactive emotional states.

How do emotional reactions operate? Emotional reactivity is a process that is initiated by a stimulus, proceeds through several internal stages, and culminates in an expressed reaction.

Let's take an example. As part of a team, you present your idea for the current project. A co-worker on your same team says angrily, "If we go with that stupid idea, we'll have to redo everything."

How do you react? One possibility is to take the comment as an insult and retort in kind. Another is to swallow your own anger and have it churn inside you for the rest of the day. The process can be broken down into five steps (corresponding to the five skandhas).

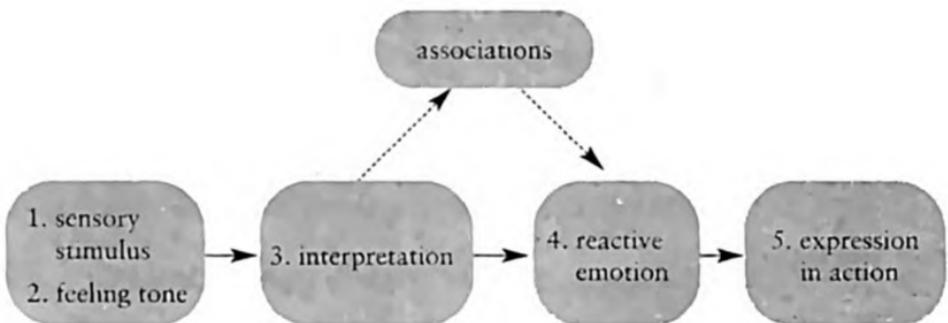
1. The first experience is the sound of the co-worker's voice.
2. It is accompanied by an unpleasant feeling.
3. The sound, tone, and words are interpreted as insulting and offensive.
4. Anger arises as an emotional reaction.
5. The anger is expressed or repressed: you deliver a stinging retort or swallow the anger and say nothing.



As you practice meditation, you see the possibility of an opening between steps 4 and 5; you see a difference between the reactive emotion of anger and the expression of that anger in action. Attention enables us to differentiate between the feeling and the expression of feeling. In actual situations, most people have difficulty in taking advantage of that opening because, by step 4, the reactive process has built up too much momentum.

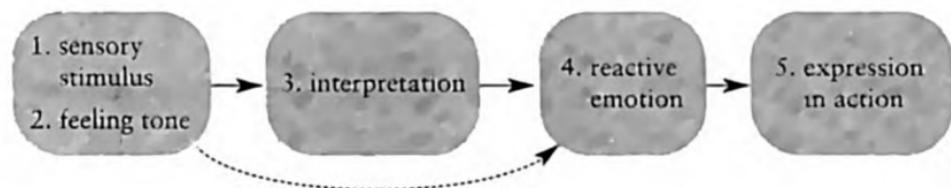
As you continue to practice, active attention penetrates the reactive process more deeply and allows you to pick up the transition from step 3 to 4, from interpretation to reactive emotion. Stepping out of the reactive process at this point is easier because the energy in the reaction is at a lower level. It doesn't have as much momentum. The first few times you do this, however, you may be surprised by a second process that you weren't aware of up to that point.

When you become aware of the transition from interpretation to reactive emotion and step out of the reactive process, you experience accumulated conditioning associated with that particular interpretation. The conditioning includes similar past experiences and the reactive emotions generated by those experiences. You feel like you've been hit by a wave that came out of nowhere. Even though the emotional associations are not connected with the present situation, they often push you back into the reaction. As attention develops, you can increasingly distinguish past associations from the present, let them go, and not react.



In the case of the angry comment from the co-worker, your work in attention lets you know you are upset. As you feel anger arise, you realize that you are upset about being called stupid. You know you aren't stupid. You know that the idea isn't stupid. You know that the co-worker routinely puts down new ideas and that his comment isn't really directed at you. Yet you still feel angry. As you stay in attention with the anger, you feel old anger and frustrations from being called stupid and not being understood in other situations having nothing to do with this one.

Continued cultivation of attention enables us to pick up the reactive process even earlier. A feeling tone, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, arises with every sensory experience. The feeling tone triggers one of the three basic reactive patterns: attraction, aversion, or indifference. When you experience the feeling tone in attention, you don't fall into the corresponding reactive pattern. You experience pleasure when you see a flower in a meadow and do not have to pick it and make it yours.



Most people want to apply meditation practice to the last stages of this process—that is, when they feel the anger and don't want to express it inappropriately. Unfortunately, by that time the emotional reaction has usually built up too much energy to be stopped. The benefit from meditation practice and attention is that we pick up the process much earlier.

If you have enough energy in attention, a new possibility opens up at each step. Let's go back to the co-worker and his offensive comment. Between steps 4 and 5, you could say, "Just because I feel angry doesn't mean that I have to retaliate." Between steps 3 and 4, you could say, "Just because he rejected the idea doesn't mean I have to be angry." Between steps 2 and 3, you could say, "Just because the comment sounded unpleasant doesn't mean I have to take it as a rejection." Steps 1 and 2 occur together. The shift at this point is, "Just because the sound is unpleasant doesn't mean that I have to react with aversion."

Choice depends on being able to perceive an alternative. If you are unable to perceive an alternative, the notion of choice is meaningless. When the reactive process is running, there is no awareness. To act differently, you have to have free attention. Free attention is energy that is not consumed by habituated patterns. With it, you see and experience events differently. New possibilities of action open up.

Reactive processes operate in two principal ways: expression or repression. The reactive emotion is either pushed out into action or pushed back out of conscious awareness. In neither case do we feel the reactive emotion or the reactive process.

When we express or push the emotional charge out into action, the emotional charge is dumped into the world and affects those around us. When we repress or push the emotional charge back, it goes into the body and produces illness or compensating behaviors such as addiction.

Attention opens a third way of working with reactive emotions. We hold them in attention, neither expressing nor repressing the reaction. When we feel the emotion completely, the energy of the emotion is transformed into attention.

How do you transform reactive energy into attention? When a strong emotional reaction arises, rest attention on the breath and include the experience of the emotion. Two mistakes are commonly made: focusing on the emotion itself and focusing on the breath to the exclusion of the emotion. If you focus on the emotion itself, more energy tends to flow into the reactive pattern and you end up reacting even more strongly. If you try to exclude the emotion from attention, you end up repressing it.

Instead, rest attention on the breath, and include as much of the sensation of the emotion as you can without falling into busyness or dullness. When you can rest with the emotion a little bit, include more of the feeling in your attention. Next, include all the physical, emotional, and cognitive reactions to the initial emotional reaction. Eventually, you will experience a shift and be able to rest calmly and at ease even when you recall the original situation. You will feel clearer and more present. At that point, the reactive process has been transformed into attention. You have begun to break down the conditioning connected to the underlying patterns.

Finally, there is one pitfall in meditation practice that you must avoid. Meditation practice raises the level of energy in your system in the form of active attention. The higher level of energy inevitably brings you into contact with reactive emotional patterns. If you now become selective and repress certain emotions, pushing them out of

attention, two things happen. The higher level of energy in your system flows into the reactive pattern, making it stronger. The higher energy also flows into the repressing pattern, making that stronger. Both the reactive patterns of the emotion and the repression are reinforced. You end up splitting in two. One part of you is capable of attention and response. The other part becomes increasingly rigid and inflexible. It takes over unpredictably whenever the repressed emotion is triggered by events or situations. Typically, a person becomes more arrogant and self-indulgent, obsessed with power, money, sex, security, or other fixations, and acts in ways to control or amass the object of the obsession. Long-term practitioners and teachers who protect areas of their lives from their practice frequently run into this problem with unfortunate and sometimes tragic results. We run the risk of a similar fate if we protect any area of our personality or lives from the increased awareness that develops in meditation.

To guard against this problem, always have at least one person, a teacher, colleague, or friend, with whom you discuss all aspects of your practice and your life. The person needs to be someone you trust and to whom you will listen regardless of the state of mind you are in or what he or she says. The *only* way to be sure that you will not protect an area of your habituated personality from the effects of practice is to have such a person in your life.

## SUMMARY

Active attention is essential for any internal transformation work. Only through attention do we step out of reactive processes that run our lives. Attention is essential if we are to uncover the natural awareness that is our human heritage.

The apparently simple method of returning to what is already there is based on the perspectives and methods of the direct awareness schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Simple does not mean easy. As we practice, we become increasingly aware of the many ways we fall out of attention. We begin to appreciate that we have to support the cultivating of attention by making adjustments in our lives.

Support for practice comes primarily from letting go of those aspects of your life that undermine or counteract the cultivation of attention. In the end, the motivation to make such changes must come from your own experience of attention, not from a person or body of teaching that tells you what to do. For practice to be truly your own, motivation and effort must come from within. Even a small experience

of the difference between reactivity and presence goes a long way in generating the confidence and inclination needed to make further efforts.

Refining practice involves understanding the principles of meditation and how to apply them. The key principle is the play between clarity and stability. By relaxing when you are distracted by thinking and by energizing when you are dull, you find the way to a vertical shift in which clarity and stability are both present.

Consistent practice is the answer to most problems that arise in meditation or life. You won't win every battle. Resistance and patterns are tenacious and persistent. With clear intention, consistent effort, confidence, and a clear understanding of the principles of practice, you can and will dismantle the patterns that prevent you from experiencing your life. Don't miss a day of practice. When you do, don't succumb to the reaction that all is lost and you might as well quit. A missed day is like a distracting thought. Once you recognize that you aren't practicing, start again. Remember that the essence of meditation is to return, return, return to the natural awareness that is already there.

With the cultivation of attention, we have the primary tool we need to move into presence. Original mind is covered by many layers of conditioning, including patterns of perception, emotional reactivity, family history, and social and cultural conditioning. All these layers have to be taken apart if we are to open to the mystery of being. Yet all this conditioning constitutes the experience of life as we now know it. To take those patterns apart is to take our lives apart, to die to the life we know. That is the challenge ahead: to die willingly and with complete awareness.