

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PRACTICE OF THE TEN STAGES OF SAMATHA

THE BENEFITS AND THE PURPOSE OF MEDITATION

A regular meditation practice can improve concentration, lower blood pressure, and improve sleep. Meditation is used to help people with chronic pain, post-traumatic stress, and disorders involving anxiety, depression, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors. Practicing meditation gives you insight into your personality, behavior and relationships. These insights can help you recognize and change conditioning and views that make your life unnecessarily difficult. People who meditate also have greater awareness and sensitivity to others, which can make a difference at work and in personal relationships. The calm and relaxation of meditation also translates into greater emotional stability when confronting the inevitable stresses of life. Any of these benefits might motivate you to take up meditation. Yet all of these are “incidental benefits.” Meditation offers much, much more.

Fully developed meditation skills give rise to some very unique and wonderful mental states accompanied by physical comfort, joy and happiness, deep satisfaction and profound inner peace. These states can also open the mind to an intuitive appreciation of our interconnectedness and dispel the illusion of separateness created by our egos. These are fruits of meditation that can be enjoyed all day long, everyday, and renewed at any time by simply sitting down and meditating.

Unfortunately, blissful meditation states, which are frequently mistaken for the ultimate goal of meditation, are dependent upon transitory and unreliable causes and conditions. Disruptive circumstances like sickness, aging, the fading of mental and physical powers can prevent the daily practices necessary to sustain these pleasurable states. They also don't make you immune to the corrupting influences of sexual lust, greed for material objects, and craving for the adulation of others. Therefore, these meditative experiences, as delightful as they are, fall short of the ultimate goal of meditation. Stated in other terms, the bliss, tranquility and equanimity of these states are only a part, albeit an important part, of the *means* to a higher goal rather than an end in themselves.

The highest goal is “awakening.” Other commonly used terms include “enlightenment,” “liberation,” or “self-realization.” All of these refer to the same complete and lasting freedom from suffering, unaffected by aging, disease or circumstance. Liberated from suffering, only true happiness exists, the bliss of perfect contentment. Wisdom also characterizes this attainment – an enlightened understanding that goes beyond the transient experience of unity and temporary dissolution of ego, involving instead a profound realization and awakening to ultimate truth. This is a transforming cognitive event that permanently dispels ignorance, not a transient experience.

The only truly satisfactory goal of the spiritual path is direct realization of the true nature of reality and the permanent liberation from suffering. A mind with this type of insight experiences life and death as a great adventure with the clear purpose to manifest love and compassion toward all sentient beings. From this standpoint, then, the aim of practicing meditation is to cultivate a mind capable of this type of awakening.

What mental abilities do you need for such a profound investigation of reality? First, you must develop stability of attention. This means being able to fully control the direction and scope of attention. The other key faculty is mindfulness - a fully, awake, alert, and totally present conscious awareness. For this you will need to increase the total conscious power of your mind.

There are ten very explicit Stages in the practice of meditation that, when understood, can be used as a systematic guide along the path to achieving both perfect *attentional stability* and fully conscious *mindful awareness*.

The culmination of this practice is a very special meditative state known as *Samatha* in Pali and *Shamatha* in Sanskrit. Characterized by effortless concentration, a mind in *Samatha* can fluidly move from object to object without losing attentional stability or single-pointedness. *Samatha* also includes being fully conscious, not only of the immediate objects of attention, but also introspectively aware of everything happening in the mind moment by moment. And a mind dwelling in this state is naturally pervaded by joy, tranquility, and equanimity.

Meditation is a profound journey. You will overcome psychological difficulties, have extraordinary experiences, and learn to use your mind with amazing proficiency. You will discover an unprecedented inner calm, and gain a deep understanding, even a direct experience, of ultimate reality. Of course, to reap these fruits you must first establish a regular practice.

THE PRACTICAL STEPS

Meditators have wasted a great deal of time and effort due to misunderstanding the nature of the mind and a lack of precise meditation instructions. Too many people have practiced for too long without achieving more than the “incidental” benefits mentioned above. There are some very practical steps in establishing a regular practice. These include identifying a suitable time and place for daily practice, finding the best posture for meditating, and cultivating the right attitude. Let’s look at each of these.

Setting a Time and Place

Ideally, you should meditate at the same time every day. If that isn’t practical, then schedule meditation for the same point in your regular daily routine. Reflect on your normal routine to find a time of day to practice that will not conflict with your other activities and obligations. You may very well have to make adjustments to your normal schedule for this to happen. But having a set time everyday for meditation, whether it is set by the clock or by your normal routine, is the best way to become consistent.

Take into consideration mental energy and clarity of mind when choosing a regular time to meditate. Schedule your meditation for when you are least likely to be agitated or tired. People have different natural rhythms, but in general the best time for meditation tends to be early mornings or anytime before about 1pm. The next best times of day are in the late afternoon and early evening. Early to mid-afternoon are often the most difficult times to meditate. You should also avoid meditating right after eating. Shortly after waking up and before eating breakfast works best for most people.

The easiest way to make regular time for practice is by getting up a little earlier than usual. You will be refreshed and alert, less likely to be disturbed by family and friends, and your mind won’t yet be agitated by the stress and activity of daily life. Of course, getting up earlier to meditate will only work if you go to sleep a little earlier as well.

No matter what time of day turns out to work best for you, you will have to make adjustments in other parts of your life to keep this commitment to practice. There is no way around the fact that the time you spend meditating is time you could have used for something else. You simply must make meditation a higher priority than certain other things or it just won’t happen.

Begin with a comfortable period of meditation. I suggest 15 or 20 minutes per day for the first week or two. Then begin increasing the length of your meditation sessions in 5-minute increments each week or every few days until you reach 45 minutes. Some people find it easier to do two shorter meditations of 20 to 30 minutes each day, which is fine at first. But I strongly recommend at least one 45-minute meditation session each day as the minimum to provide a solid basis for your practice. As you advance through the Stages and become more skilled, your meditations will become more interesting and enjoyable. You will eventually have no problem extending from 45 minutes to an hour and more than once a day. But best to work up gradually rather than do too much at first and become discouraged.

Once you have chosen a time to meditate, treat it like any other time-related commitment such as work or class. Spend that time meditating, nothing else. Make sure others know you are not available during that time. At first you may get some resistance from family or anyone else not used to you being unavailable, but they will adapt. Remind yourself that meditation time is *your* time; a time you have set aside for yourself and a time free from the demands of the world. Considering how much meditation will improve your relationships with others, you shouldn't regard taking this time for yourself as selfish. The time you take to meditate will ultimately benefit everyone you come in contact with.

Also, practice with someone else if possible. Their commitment will reinforce yours and vice-versa. If you have clearly established your intention but your practice partner is not serious, end the arrangement. Meditation groups provide especially strong support, but they don't usually meet every day.

Creating a regular place for meditation is as important as setting a regular time. Choose a comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. But also choose a place you can clearly identify in your mind as your meditation spot. You or others may use that place for other purposes at other times. But it should be a place where you can keep close at hand anything you might use in your meditation, such as your meditation cushions, timer, and meditation shawl. Even better is to designate a place just for meditation. Design and decorate it in ways that inspire you and remind you of why you are meditating and what you hope to gain. Some people like to set up an altar as well. Religious or not, that doesn't matter. Its purpose is to inspire and empower you in your practice.

The Right Posture

Any comfortable position works for meditation – as long as it's not so comfortable that you fall asleep. There are four traditional meditation postures, sitting, standing, walking and lying down. They all “work,” none being more “right” than others. Here I provide some basic pointers to help you find a good sitting position.

You can meditate sitting in a chair, on a meditation bench, or the floor. Full-lotus position – legs crossed with the feet on top of the knees – provides a very stable position for meditation, conducive to staying alert. But it's not necessary for success in meditation, and if you aren't flexible enough to sit in full-lotus easily it can cause serious injury. The half-lotus position, with legs crossed and only one foot on top of the opposite knee, is also very stable. But it too is not easy for most adult westerners. Probably the most popular meditation posture is sitting on the floor in a simple cross-legged position with the ankles slightly tucked under the opposite thigh or knee and a cushion under the buttocks. Alternatively, both knees and lower legs can be flat on the floor, one in front of the other (the so-called Burmese style). Low Japanese-style meditation benches

called *seiza* are also very popular. If you find sitting on the floor difficult then sit on a regular straight-backed chair.

Whatever position you choose, the most important thing is that it cause your body the least amount of strain or pain, especially during longer periods of sitting. Expect some aches and pains from simply sitting still. But the position chosen should be one that produces the least discomfort and does not aggravate pre-existing injuries.

Experiment with different postures for a while before deciding which you prefer. And there are a variety of ways to fine-tune any position you choose. That might mean using pillows to support your knees or adjusting the height of the *zafu* (a round cushion) under your buttocks when sitting cross-legged. *Seiza* benches come with different heights and different slants (some are even adjustable), so be sure to try out several. When sitting in a chair, make sure your thighs are horizontal to take the strain off your back. If your legs are short try putting something on the floor under your feet, if they are long, put a cushion on the seat. A lumbar cushion can also be helpful. There are all kinds of other straps, pads and pillows that people use, but remember you won't eliminate all discomfort, so don't get carried away. As your practice develops it will become easier to sit, so be patient. Eventually you will be totally free from all discomfort and able to sit for hours, and you'll get up feeling quite good, not stiff or numb.

During your meditation sessions, try not to move at all. This might not be possible at first. But at least wait as long as you can before moving. Then when you do, change your position slowly and deliberately, with full attention to the sensations in your body as you move. You will discover that whatever caused you to move in the first place will disappear as soon as you move, but something else will appear soon after. If you move again, a new and possibly more intense, discomfort will likely appear even more quickly. Discoveries such as these are important elements of meditation practice. You will learn much about yourself, your mind and your body in the course of these observations. Don't think of the physical discomfort due to sitting still as something that should or even can be completely overcome through adjustments to posture. So eliminate all *unnecessary* discomfort, but regard the inevitable aches and pains that remain as part of your practice.

The Right Attitude

First and foremost, realize there are no failures in meditation (except perhaps the failure to actually do the practice). As meditation teacher Stephanie Nash is fond of saying, a good sit is one you did, and the only bad meditation is one you didn't do. This is good advice and should be taken to heart.

More specifically, there is a natural tendency to constantly judge the quality of your meditation and become discouraged. You need to become aware of that tendency so you can catch yourself at it and learn to overcome it. Know what to expect – the mind will wander, you will be afflicted by “monkey mind”, sleepiness, restlessness and impatience. Every meditator experiences these things and they will all be a part of your practice as well. If you persevere, they will all be overcome, probably much sooner than you expect.

Approach your meditation in a relaxed manner, free from judgment and expectation. If words like “struggle” or “difficult” come to mind when thinking or talking about your meditation practice, reexamine your attitude. In meditation interviews students sometimes tell me they are “trying really hard” but not making any progress. There really is no place in meditation for trying hard, forcefulness, and exertion. Meditation consists of a series of simple, very easy tasks that need only to be repeated until they bear fruit. What will make meditation “hard” is if you allow

yourself to become disappointed because your meditation “progress” isn’t meeting up to the hopes and expectations generated by your ego. The “struggle” in meditation comes from trying to force yourself to do something that some part of your mind doesn’t believe is going to work. “Difficult” comes from the disappointment you feel at failure. Once this perception of failure takes hold, the ego-self doesn’t want to be to blame. If you become convinced you have been “trying really hard,” then the ego-self is exonerated of responsibility for failing to meet its self-imposed expectations. The ego-self then blames the method, or the teacher, or makes up a story about being unsuited for meditation. But it is not “your” fault.

There are several problems here. First of all, the judgment and sense of failure sap your motivation. When you force yourself to do something that you no longer have motivation for, it creates an emotional state of striving and exertion. This feeling of having to try really hard undermines your faith in the method, self-confidence, and willingness to consistently repeat the simple steps of the practice. It may be your enthusiasm and desire to succeed that led you to an attitude of exertion in the first place. But that attitude agitates the mind, undermines the practice, and feeds first into fatigue, then into impatience, and finally disappointment.

Again, don’t judge yourself and don’t compare yourself to anyone else. In spiritual practice in general and meditation in particular, small measures repeated over and over produce huge results. Anyone and everyone can succeed. Some people have a problem coming to grips with just how easy the practice is. The practice is so simple you may find it difficult to just keep repeating the same basic things over and over again until you succeed. This is what the term *diligence* refers to. Other synonyms for diligence are *right effort* and *joyful effort*. I especially like joyful effort as a description because it captures the essence of a wise yogi’s approach to meditation.

The only place to make greater effort in meditation is by creating the opportunities to actually spend time practicing. That’s it. So have faith, trust and confidence: faith in the method, trust that the results will come with continued practice, and confidence in your own ability.

THE BASIC PRACTICE

The practice is quite simple. Direct your attention toward a well-defined object. Whenever your attention slips, redirect your attention back to that object. Repeat as often as necessary.

In the early Stages of the practice (Stage 2 until Stage 6), you’re aiming to gain progressively more *stability of attention*. At the same time, you don’t want to limit your awareness of other things circulating within the field of conscious awareness. In other words, in the first six Stages, you want to develop *stability of attention* but not single pointed focus.

THE MEDITATION OBJECT

The *meditation object* is whatever you have chosen to serve as the focus of your attention during meditation. Buddhist Sutras, traditional meditation manuals and most meditation teachers regard the breath as an ideal object for cultivating attention and mindfulness. One of the big advantages of the breath is that it’s always there. You don’t need to do anything, to repeat a mantra or visualize an image, so you can always be a completely passive observer of the meditation object. And because you don’t rely on any special meditation items, you can meditate on the breath at any opportunity, wherever you are, every day even up until the moment of death. The sensations of the breath also change constantly, and as concentration deepens the breath becomes fainter and the sensations less distinct. This makes it an excellent object for developing powerful attention through closely observing its many subtle details. Also, because it changes it is very conducive to insight into the nature of impermanence. And although it is constantly

changing, the breath also repeats over and over, which makes it suitable as a *fixed* (i.e. stable) meditation object for entering very deep states of meditative absorption. Because of all these different qualities, the breath is used as the basis for the practice of tranquility and insight (*samatha-vipassana*), dry insight practices (*sukha-vipassana*), and the meditative absorptions (*jhana*).

Whenever we refer to the “breath” as the meditation object, what we actually mean is the *sensations* that are produced by breathing. This is very important to remember. Usually you will observe the sensations of the breath somewhere around the nostrils. Some teachers and traditions suggest use the sensations of rising and falling at the abdomen. I prefer the tip of the nose because of the much greater sensitivity of the nerve endings in that region.¹ Also, because of the coarseness of sensations at the abdomen, when the breath becomes very shallow they can become more difficult to detect. However, Because of the large movements of the abdomen, beginners often do find the sensations there easier to follow, at least at first. Nevertheless, most meditators will definitely find it worthwhile to learn to use the sensations at the nose.

Even with all these benefits of the breath, please realize you can use any meditation object with this process. All of the same principles outlined in the Ten Stages apply to a visualized object, a mantra, and to loving-kindness practices. They can be used in conjunction with the noting technique of the Mahasi-style *Vipassana* method, the breath concentration and body-scanning techniques of the U Ba Khin/Goenka *Vipassana* method, or the uniquely systematic *Vipassana* of Shinzen Young. In all these meditation practices you face the same problems of mind-wandering, distraction and dullness and you can overcome them using the same techniques. That said, not all meditation objects lead to the final Stages as readily as the sensations of the breath.

A PHASED TRANSITION TO THE MEDITATION OBJECT

Rather than just jumping right in and focusing your attention on the breath at the nose, it is better to make a gentle transition from the free-ranging attention of daily life to a at the nose. There are four phases to this transition. In each of these phases you define a “domain” of primary interest and allow your attention to range freely within that domain. Any object within that domain of interest can serve as the focus of attention at any time. Then, in each successive phase you restrict the domain of interest further until attention finally coalesces on the sensation of the breath at the nose. Use this phased transition each time you sit down to meditate.

As you move through these four phases, relax your body, calm you’re your mind, and deliberately evoke feelings of contentment. Continually take notice of the pleasant sensations that contribute to your sense of relaxation, feelings of contentment, and overall happiness. Relaxation and happiness perform very important functions in the process of training the mind.

Phase 1. Focus on the Present

Begin by closing your eyes and simply allowing yourself to become fully aware of any and all sensations in the present moment. With eyes closed, the two main sources of sensory stimulation are sounds and sensations that originate in or on the body. You want to “open” your awareness and allow attention to tune into and range freely among any of the sounds, bodily sensations, smells, thoughts, and anything else present in conscious awareness. Within this holistic

¹ Significantly more of the cerebral cortex is devoted to interpreting sensations from the face as compared to the abdomen.

panorama, the one limitation you impose on the movements and focus of your attention is to remain in the *present moment*, the *here and now*.

This is an extremely important limitation with regard to thoughts. Being aware of background noises or physical sensations is part of present moment awareness. Thinking about them beyond noticing and recognizing them will take you away from the present. So feel free to let your attention be drawn to a particular sound or sensation. Let the mind rest with and observe it until you have a sense of having satisfied that urge. But don't engage in thoughts about these sense objects. Observe rather than identify with feelings in your body. Don't analyze a sound, don't deliberate on a particular smell. Moment to moment, just attend to the arising and passing of objects within the field of conscious awareness.

If you find some sound, smell or bodily sensation pleasant, take a moment to savor the quality of pleasure it arouses in the mind. Allow the pleasantness to condition your mind towards a state of happiness in the present moment. Remember, savor the subjective quality of pleasure, not the sense object that caused it. If your mind reacts to something as unpleasant, just notice the reaction and let it go.

You will certainly be aware of all sorts of mental activity. You may have thoughts about the future – things you want and don't want to happen. You may have memories – pleasant and unpleasant. You might be thinking about things happening in other places or your imagination may project you into all sorts scenarios, both mundane and fantastic. Expect these kinds of mental objects to appear in the field of conscious awareness. Being fully present means knowing when these thoughts are present. But don't engage in their content. Just acknowledge their presence and let them be.

In general, disregard all thoughts that have nothing to do with the present moment. Only rarely and briefly is the content of any thought relevant to the present. However, some thoughts, such as how to make your posture more comfortable and stable, can be helpful for settling the mind and becoming focused in the present. But again, don't get caught and carried away by the discursive mind. Even thoughts about the present will take you away if you entertain them too long. Mindfully observing thoughts is tricky, so stay preferentially focused on sounds and other physical sensations to avoid being hooked by thoughts. A helpful phrase for dealing with distractions of any kind is, *let it come, let it be, let it go*.

Don't try to block the distraction, just *let it come*. Don't focus or engage the distraction, simply disregard and *let it be*. Then, simply *let it go* away by itself. This is an entirely passive process. There is nothing to "do" but allow these objects to arise and pass away moment by moment as they will.

Phase 2. Focus on Bodily Sensations

After a period of becoming fully present with every kind of sensory stimulus, limit your attention to bodily sensations. Bodily sensations include all physical sensations that originate on or within the body, such as touch, pressure, warmth, coolness, movement, tingling, visceral sensations, and so forth. With attention limited to sensations of the body, let everything else slip into the background of awareness. Nothing should be suppressed or excluded from your overall field of conscious awareness, so sounds, smells or thoughts may still be present. Just don't focus on them. Let them come, let them be and let them go as you restrict your attention to body sensations.

As you make this shift, you may discover tensions or discomfort in the body. Release any tension you find and make any final adjustments in posture to maximize comfort and stability.

Take note of any pleasant sensations and spend a few moments enjoying the pleasure they provide. These might include any type of contact with the body such as feelings of air movement on the skin, warmth or coolness, softness, or the firmness of the meditation cushion. It might include deeper sensations from the muscles and joints, or warm feeling in the chest or abdomen. Or there might simply be an overall pleasant sense of stillness and peace. Whatever the sensations, explore them freely.

Sometimes, especially when you are first learning to meditate, a lot of mental agitation and physical discomfort comes up. This makes becoming relaxed, contented and calm much more difficult. If restlessness arises or contentment begins to fade, then mental activity begins to stir up thoughts, memories, and emotions. It's completely fine if that happens. Don't react with annoyance or make efforts at suppressing these things. You aren't in any hurry to move to the next phase. Rather, return to Phase 1, broaden your awareness, and become fully present once again. Most especially, seek out the pleasurable elements of present-moment experience and try to reestablish and reinforce feelings of contentment and happiness. Do this as often as necessary until the mind can rest easily with attention directed towards body sensations.

During the entire period of a given meditation session you may not get past Phase 2. This is perfectly acceptable. But realize, becoming more focused often settles the mind. So don't hesitate to move to the next phase. You can always return to this phase if narrowing the focus doesn't work out.

Phase 3. Focus on Bodily Sensations Related to the Breath.

As you sit quietly and observe the body, attention will naturally gravitate toward the ongoing sensations of movement related to breathing. This occurs because little else changes in the body while sitting quietly. When this happens, begin to pay more specific attention to the breath sensations. You will notice these sensations of the breath especially around your nose and face, in your chest and abdomen. You may possibly notice sensations of movement caused by the breath in your upper arms and shoulders or other places as well. Allow yourself to become familiar with all of these breath-related sensations. Notice in particular any pleasant qualities associated with these sensations. You might also notice that the mind is mildly invigorated during the in-breath while the out-breath is more relaxing and soothing.

Without blocking or suppressing anything else from the overall field of your awareness, restrict your attention to these breath-related bodily sensations. When this becomes comfortable, begin to focus more directly on the sensations of the breath in specific areas. Closely observe the rising and falling of the abdomen, then the expansion and contraction of the chest, then the sensations produced by the movement of air in and out of the nostrils as you breathe naturally. Allow your mind to move freely between the abdomen, chest, and nose, and anywhere else where breath-related sensations are evident.

Breathe naturally. You want to be a passive observer, simply noticing whatever breath-related sensations happen to be there. You can often achieve greater perceptual clarity by imagining looking at the location where the sensations occur. Let the eyes rest in a position that serves that imagination. Don't try to actually direct your eyes at the tip of your nose or the abdomen -- that is unnatural and will create discomfort. And don't try to visualize the area. Just imagine you are looking at the source of the sensations and your eyes will naturally be directed downward to a point a few inches in front of your face and rest there comfortably. Take note of, savor, and even deliberately induce feelings of peace, contentment, and happiness associated with periods of greater stability of attention and inner calm.

Phase 4. Focus on Sensations of the Breath at the Nose.

Now direct your attention specifically to the sensations produced by the air moving in and out of your nostrils. Locate the place where those sensations are most obvious -- just inside the nostrils, at the tip of the nose, on the upper lip, wherever. The area may be as small as a pencil eraser or two inches across. Also, the location of sensations may not be quite the same for the in-breath and the out-breath

Keep your attention on the area where the breath sensations are clearest. Don't try to follow the air as it moves into the body or out of the nose. Don't follow the air at all. Just observe the *sensations* produced by the movement of the air passing over the area where you have focused your attention. Remember, the meditation object is the sensation of the breath, *not the breath itself*.

Without actively blocking or suppressing anything else from awareness, continue to observe the sensations of the in-breath and the out-breath. That's it. Just observe those sensations. If your attention wanders, gently bring it back. From this point on, the sensations of the breath in the vicinity of the nose will be your primary meditation object.

Summary

Realize that what I've presented above is an actual "method" not just a nice way to begin meditation. So take the practice seriously, especially if you are a novice meditator. Here's a summary to help you remember each point.

Sit down, close your eyes, and simply being present, gradually restrict the natural movement of attention. This transition needs to be gradual and gentle. Emphasize relaxation, peacefulness, and pleasure rather than will power and effortful striving.

Phase 1: Establish an open and relaxed awareness and attention but give priority to physical sensations of every kind over thoughts.

Phase 2: Give priority to bodily sensations over other sensations.

Phase 3: Give priority to sensations related to the breath over other bodily sensations.

Phase 4: Finally, give priority to sensations of the breath at the nose over other breath-related sensations.

The amount of time it takes to move through these four phases varies from person to person and from one meditation session to the next. For the novice, these phases may occupy most or all of the entire meditation session. But as the training takes effect, it will take less and less time. Eventually the transition from the free-ranging attention of daily life to a stable focus on the meditation object will occur in a matter of seconds.

COUNTING AS A METHOD OF STABILIZING THE ATTENTION

Counting breaths is a very effective way to stabilize your attention at the beginning of a meditation session. If you are a novice meditator you should use it extensively. Move through the four phases described above. Once your attention is restricted to the sensations of the breath around the tip of the nose, you silently begin counting your breaths with the goal of attending to the sensations continuously for ten consecutive breaths.

Interestingly, what you designate in your mind as the beginning and end of one full breath cycle matters. Most people automatically tend to think of the beginning of the cycle as the in-breath and the end of the out-breath as the end of that cycle. But the mind naturally tends to shift focus whenever you have completed a task, so if you think of the breath cycle this way then the

mind tends to wander during the pause between the end of the out-breath and the beginning of the next in-breath. This will happen less if you think of the beginning of the out-breath as the start of the breath cycle. Although this may seem like trivial detail, it often does make a difference. An alternative approach is to silently say the number in the pause between the end of the out-breath and the beginning of the next in-breath. This “fills the gap” and helps to keep the mind on task.

You can consider your attention to be continuous if you have not missed either an inhale or an exhale and not lost count of the breaths. Don't expect perfect attention. Rather, as a novice it is enough to have awareness of most of each in-breath and most of each out-breath. Don't expect to be “single-pointed” or focused exclusively on the breath. You will naturally be aware of many other things as you are trying to continuously observe the breath. You can set higher standards for yourself as you become more skilled, but in the beginning that is unreasonable and self-defeating. Not only will get frustrated if you try, but too narrow of a focus at an early Stage only causes the mind to wander more quickly. You are also not looking to achieve non-verbal, non-discursive, or non-conceptual observation at this point. You can talk to yourself and think about the breath as much as you like while observing it -- so long as you don't completely lose awareness of the actual sensations, or lose track of the count. When your attention slips and you lose awareness of the breath or lose track of the count, which happens frequently at first, then simply start over again at one.

If you have started over numerous times without success in counting ten breaths, change the goal to five. Before long, 10 breaths will be a consistent norm. Once you have succeeded in counting ten (or perhaps five) consecutive breaths without losing awareness of the breath, continue to observe the sensations of the breath but without counting. Counting soon becomes automatic, and once it does you still forget the breath and then the mind wanders even while you continue to count. Therefore counting beyond ten breaths has little value. The rule is “never more than ten, never less than five”.

Some meditation systems offer elaborate breath counting practices; counting forwards and backwards, counting ten breaths, then nine, then eight and so on. This might be useful for some people. But for most people simply counting ten or five breaths is adequate. However, if your mind is particularly agitated or wanders again quite soon after you bring it back, do another ten-count each time you return to the breath. Also, if your mind wanders for a long time, once you became aware that it has wandered, don't immediately return to the breath at the nose. Rather, connect with general body sensations (phase 2 above), then the sensations created by the breath (phase 3), and then begin counting ten breaths at the nose.

Regardless of your Stage, I strongly recommend making counting a regular part of your practice. Even if you are using something other than the breath as a meditation object, counting breaths is a wonderful way to transition from daily activities into a more focused meditative state. Just like Pavlov's dogs, over time the mind becomes conditioned to the counting of the breaths as the signal for beginning meditation. Throughout the ten stages, an initial period of counting will also provide valuable information regarding the state of your mind and the distractions most likely to arise during your meditation. When you have achieved mastery of Stage 10, you will have effortless concentration before reaching the tenth breath.

Here, monks, a monk goes to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty place, sits down, folds his legs crosswise, keeps his body erect, and brings mindful awareness to the fore. "With mindful awareness, he breathes in, with mindful awareness he breathes out."
(Anapanasatti Sutta).