



**Culadasa:** Welcome back to *Meditation Illuminated*. In today’s segment, which is our final segment, Matthew is going to take you through what it’s like to work through some of the stages. Now, there are ten stages in the book and we obviously can’t cover all of those, so Matthew is going to be focusing on some of the first few stages leading up to the stages of the skilled meditator.

**Matthew Immergut:** I want to talk about the specific stages now. In the process that Culadasa laid out for us last time, you go through the six reminders and the four-step transition and then you count, placing your attention on the breath and its sensations at the nose. Very soon, at least for beginning meditators, this is the first discovery of how wild and uncontrollable the mind is, and very often leads to a certain level of discouragement. People feel like failures and become critical of themselves because they have an idea that meditation is about focusing the attention, which is only true in part. The point is not to become really good at focusing your attention on the sensations of the breath at the nose. That is not the aim.

The aim is, on a fundamental level, to learn about the nature of your mind. Using attention at the breath is simply skillful means to begin this investigation process. It is best to transform any criticism, doubt, or judgment into curiosity.

When you first sit down to meditate, place your attention on the breath. Your first discovery may be, “Wow, my mind is really out of control.” That discovery is amazing, so be curious about that, ask questions. What’s going on when I can’t follow the simplest direction of paying attention to the breath? What are the obstacles in the way? What are the things that thwart my ability to do this?

The attitude that we want to take at this very beginning is one of curiosity, like a scientist, observing the nature of our mind. This is what happens right when we sit down to meditate. We place our attention on the breath, and very soon we are lost in mind wandering. I’m sure that’s



familiar to all of you, but let's look at this process, as scientists of the mind, a little closer—let's look at the details.

When we end up mind wandering and thinking about something totally random—when we had wanted to watch the attention—place attention on the breath. The untrained mind produces distractions, and one of those distractions becomes more interesting than the breath. Eventually that distraction displaces the meditation object so that you forget that you're meditating and you forget the meditation object. Once the mind tires of that particular distraction, it starts a sequence of mind wandering. The sequence is: distractions lead to forgetting, and forgetting leads to mind wandering.

Let me break this down for you. The way I like to think about it is as beats of attention. You can imagine that these are the beats of attention to my breath. I sit down to meditate. I focus on the breath. Everything's going well. All of a sudden, the mind produces a distraction. Let's put the distraction over here—we'll call this distraction the Bahamas. Right now, the Bahamas are much more interesting than the breath. My attention touches the Bahamas, touches the breath again, the Bahamas again, the breath again.

Soon enough, the attention finds the Bahamas more interesting and they start to get more beats of attention. The breath isn't totally lost yet but more and more a future vacation in the Bahamas receives more and more attention. Eventually, the distraction of the Bahamas receives all the beats of attention, and the breath is totally forgotten. Once the breath is forgotten and we tire of thinking about the Bahamas, you begin thinking about the piña colada you're going to get and its little yellow umbrella. You remember the time at a Chinese restaurant when you got a little yellow umbrella that your brother stuck into your hand.

This is how mind wandering works—this sequence of association. A distraction is engaging enough to capture your attention, and this leads to forgetting. Once you've forgotten the breath—



and once the mind is tired of the distraction—a sequence of mind wandering happens. That’s essentially what happens.

In stage two of this process of working with the stages, we work with mind wandering: the last event first. In stage three, we work with forgetting. In stage four, we work with distractions. This process is very systematic and sequential. We’re not going to work on developing single-pointed concentration in order to get rid of all distractions until we’ve dealt with mind wandering, and so too with forgetting. We have to know the stages: the obstacles that we face and how to skillfully work with them.

You’ll notice that I skipped to stage two: so what’s stage one? Stage one is probably the most difficult stage, and it is the most difficult and the simplest stage, because it establishes a regular, diligent meditation practice. That means never missing a single day of meditation. Stage one is the hardest stage, but unless you commit to that first stage of developing a regular sitting practice, all of the other stages are not going to develop. Stage one is developing a regular sitting practice, and the book gives all sorts of tips on how to begin that process.

To address stage two, let’s talk about how we deal with mind wandering. We’ve gotten distracted, forgetting the breath, forgetting that we’re meditating. We’re off mind wandering. What you’ll notice, in mind wandering, is that there’s this amazing moment when you suddenly realize that you’ve been mind wandering. You think, “Oh, wait a minute. I wanted to watch the breath, but now I’m off thinking about my brother sticking my hand with a little yellow umbrella, unfortunately.”

I want you to notice that this moment of realizing you weren’t doing what you wanted to do was not under your conscious control—it was a completely unconscious process. It was as if you just remembered to mail a check, or a phone call you had to make. Some unconscious part of your mind alerted you to the fact that you are not doing what you wanted to do. You wanted to focus attention on the breath, but you’re thinking about something else. You just had a little epiphany,



an *a-ha* moment of introspective awareness. It's a moment in which awareness does its job right, alerting you that there's a disconnect between what you wanted to do and what you're currently doing.

Unfortunately, when we have these a-ha moments of introspective awareness, the reaction we have most commonly is criticism and judgment: “Oh, damn it, I'm mind wandering again.” We get upset with ourselves. That's the worst thing to do. Any meditation teacher will tell you, when you realize that you're mind wandering, gently bring your attention back to the breath. Before you bring your attention back to the breath, when you realize you've been mind wandering, you want to reward that moment, you want to affirm that moment. You want to feel good about the fact that your mind just woke you up to the fact that you're doing something that you didn't want to do. Your mind gets you back on track.

Remember that awakening happens totally unconsciously, and the only way to influence an unconscious process is through positive reinforcement. When you have that a-ha moment, when you realize you've been mind wandering, you need to feel good about that fact. You need to give yourself a little mental pat on the back. It doesn't have to be some big event, but it has to be an authentic appreciation that a part of your mind alerted you to the fact that the a-ha moment, the epiphany, the moment of introspective awareness happened, and that you appreciate it. Because the more that you appreciate it, the quicker and quicker it will happen: positive reinforcement.

When that unconscious process arises to inform you that you're mind wandering, and you respond with an appreciation, it's as if that unconscious piece of your mind understands that you want this process to take place more and more often. You'll start mind wandering for a minute, and then you'll have an a-ha moment or you'll have a moment of introspective awareness, and you're rewarded. The mind gradually introduces that process sooner—55 seconds, 54 seconds, 30 seconds, 25 seconds.



Soon enough, if you reward that mechanism over and over, there will be no mind wandering at all. It will automatically correct and alert you to the fact that you're about to start mind wandering.

Now think about the opposite. What we usually do is criticize. We criticize the moment, and we get all upset at the moment. What does that do? That sends a message to the very mechanism that's going to help you overcome mind wandering that you don't want it to come back. It's the negative reinforcement of a very positive moment.

The key to this process (and the key to all of the training through these stages) is positive reinforcement of the behaviors we want, rather than negative reinforcement of the behaviors we don't want—like training a pet. We reward gentleness and appreciation.

Let me recap very quickly. Distractions lead to forgetting, which leads to mind wandering. In stage two, when we deal with mind wandering, we appreciate that a-ha moment of introspective awareness, that moment at which we realize we've been mind wandering. Then, we gently return attention to the breath, in an unhurried and relaxed way, and we reengage the breath. This exercises directed attention. Stability of attention is the ability to direct, sustain, and control the scope of our attention. Here is the exact moment where you most exercise your capacity to direct your attention back to the meditation object. That's half of the joyful effort is bringing your attention back to the meditation object.

Then you have to sustain your attention on the meditation object. There's a technique called “following” that can be helpful for doing this. This technique means following the details of the breath. You've brought your attention gently back to the breath. Try to find the very beginning of the in-breath. Try to find the spot where the air touches the skin at that very first in breath. If you can do that clearly and well, try to find the very beginning of the out breath. It's going to be a little harder, because the air is warmed. If you can find the beginning of the in-breath and the beginning of the out-breath, increase the challenge. Try to find the very beginning of the in-



breath and the very end of the in-breath, and then try to find the very beginning of the out-breath and the end of the out-breath. Once you can do that clearly, increase the challenge further. Try to find one or two sensations between the beginning of the in-breath and the end of the in-breath, or the beginning of the out-breath and the end of the out-breath. If that's easy, notice the pauses between the two.

The idea of following the breath is that you're giving the mind a challenge. The mind loves games, and the breath isn't the most interesting object. But if we give it a game or a challenge, the mind enjoys that. Therefore if you treat the breath as an exercise, game, or challenge, you'll be more engaged with it. As you progress and your perception clarifies, you're going to have to increase the challenge as well.

Following is just one technique. There are other techniques that we introduce, but in this early stage, especially at stage two, do anything that helps you keep engaged with the breath. You can think about the breath, you can envision something visual moving with the breath, you can say “in” and “out.” Whatever techniques helps you in these early stages to keep engaged with the breath, you should use them.

That's the basic practice of overcoming mind wandering. Appreciate the moment of introspective awareness, feel good about it, and gently return to the breath. Reengage by using following or another technique. When you reengage, don't forget to keep your peripheral awareness open. Stay aware of everything that's happening around you, and stay aware of what's happening inside the mind. Before you know it, you will overcome mind wandering.

Without a doubt, through positive affirmation, reward, pleasure, and enjoyment, the mind will automatically learn to no longer mind wander. It will stop. Then you will be ready to move on to stage three, which is about forgetting, and then to stage four, which is about overcoming distractions. Stage five is a little different—dealing with dullness along the whole trajectory—and in stage six you achieve exclusive attention. This is all laid out in the book, and it's a lot to



cover in this lecture. I think that this is enough to work with on stage two in mind wandering.  
Thank you.

**Culadasa:** In this brief retreat, we were only able to cover the method for entering into the meditative state and some of its early stages. There are ten stages, which might leave you thinking, “My goodness, how long does it take to accomplish these ten stages?”

If you establish a regular, daily meditation practice, and sustain it, it shouldn't take that long. As a layperson with family, working in the world, you can progress through all ten stages in a matter of a few years. But what's required for that?

First of all, it's a daily meditation practice. In order to make the kind of progress that I just talked about, that should involve a minimum of a 45-minute meditation sit each day. That doesn't mean you have to start out sitting for 45 minutes. You can start out by sitting 10 minutes, 15 minutes at a time, and then over the course of a week or two, gradually increase that to half an hour until eventually you get up to 45 minutes every day. That's a minimum. If you could do an hour a day or two 45-minute sits a day, you'll accelerate your progress.

In addition to a regular, daily sitting practice, it is also enormously helpful if, on a periodic basis, you do more meditation than that. For example, you might join or even start a meditation group that gets together and does a daylong retreat spending a full day in meditation once a month. It is very helpful to do regular retreats. These don't have to be three-month or three-year retreats. A week, ten days, or two weeks would be plenty of time. If you can do these retreats once or twice a year, this too will accelerate your progress through the stages.

It's partly a function of how much time you can put into the practice. Of course your individual life situation is going to have an impact, the more chaotic, disruptive and stressful your life obviously the longer it's going to take to achieve some of the more rarefied meditation states. Any layperson can do this and you can do it in a reasonable period of time, but you must have a

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regular daily practice. If you're really serious about it, you must take advantage of any of those opportunities that arise to do more than just a 45-minute meditation sit every day.

Thank you very much for joining us on this retreat. I hope that you take away from it an inspiration to do a serious meditation practice. My wish is that you are very successful in your practice and that you achieve the ultimate goal of awakening. Thank you very much.