

# An Outline of Practice

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Chinese	xíng
Korean	haeng
Vietnamese	hành
Japanese	gyō
English	practice

華

Chinese	huá
Korean	hua
Vietnamese	hòa
Japanese	ka
English	flower

**Shinzen Young**  
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# Introduction

Have you ever noticed that sometimes Buddhist practitioners seem sort of stiff or zombie-like in life? I went through a long period of that. What cured me was my encounter with Zen. Zen puts a big emphasis on acting, speaking, and thinking from a place of dynamic spontaneity. Zen spontaneity might be thought of as the motor analog of what I call [flow](#).

Recently I've been thinking about how practice involves training of one's motor circuits as well as training of one's sensory circuits. In Buddhism, action (Sanskrit *karma*) is traditionally analyzed into three categories: body (*kāya*) action, speech (*vāk*) action, and thought (*citta*) action. I find it interesting that thought can be viewed as both a sensory experience (*viññāna*) and a volitional act (*karma*). When you think about it, it makes sense. On one hand, we see mental images and hear mental talk (sensory perceptions). On the other hand we visualize situations and mentally discuss them (intentional actions). Although we tend to think of the word "motor" as relating to the control of muscles, we should perhaps generalize that adjective to include the aspects of thought that are under voluntary control. I suspect that when neuroscience is finally able to map human thought circuitry, it will contain both sensory elements and motor elements.

## The Outline

Big picture wise, we could analyze psycho-spiritual practice in terms of two binary contrasts.

### Sensory Training vs Motor Training Improving Content vs Unblocking Contour

The phrase "unblock contour" requires some clarification. Say you're looking at a pond of water that has a complex pattern of colors—greenish, blackish, reddish.... Say further that an invisible wind is blowing on the pond creating ripples and waves. There would be two ways you could relate to the pond. In terms of qualitative content, you could be interested in the color configuration of the water. In terms of dynamic contour, you could be interested in the waves and ripples. The changing contour reflects the movement of the invisible wind. In this metaphor, the wind is what in Buddhism is called [anicca](#), in East Asian medicine and martial arts is called [qi](#), and what is (sometimes!) meant by the English word spirit.

To continue to the metaphor, "unblocking the contour" refers to the process of training the water to conform more readily to the movement of the wind. In the pond of sensory experience, that's achieved through mindfulness training. In the pond of motor function, that's achieved through what might be referred to as "spontaneity training."

Here's the breakdown:

IMPROVE CONTENT			UNBLOCK CONTOUR		
TRAIN SENSORY CIRCUITS	Surface View	Deep View	Surface View	Deep View	
	Strengthen positive emotions  Foster rational thought	Gain liberating insight (Wisdom content)	Visual Flow Auditory Flow Somatic Flow	Expansion-Contraction Flow	
TRAIN MOTOR CIRCUITS	Primary	Secondary	Body Karma	Speech Karma	Mind Karma
	Skillful action ( <i>sīla</i> , admirable character, ethics, good karma...)	Skillful performance (professional skill, artistic skill, academic skill, etc.)	Bodily actions ride on flow	Speech rides on flow	Thought rides on flow (Wisdom Function)

Note that “liberating insight” and “thought rides on flow” are simply the sensory side and the motor side of the same phenomenon—the Wisdom Content vs the Wisdom Function.

Spiritual wisdom provides you with specific knowledge content. By specific content I mean knowledge of things like:

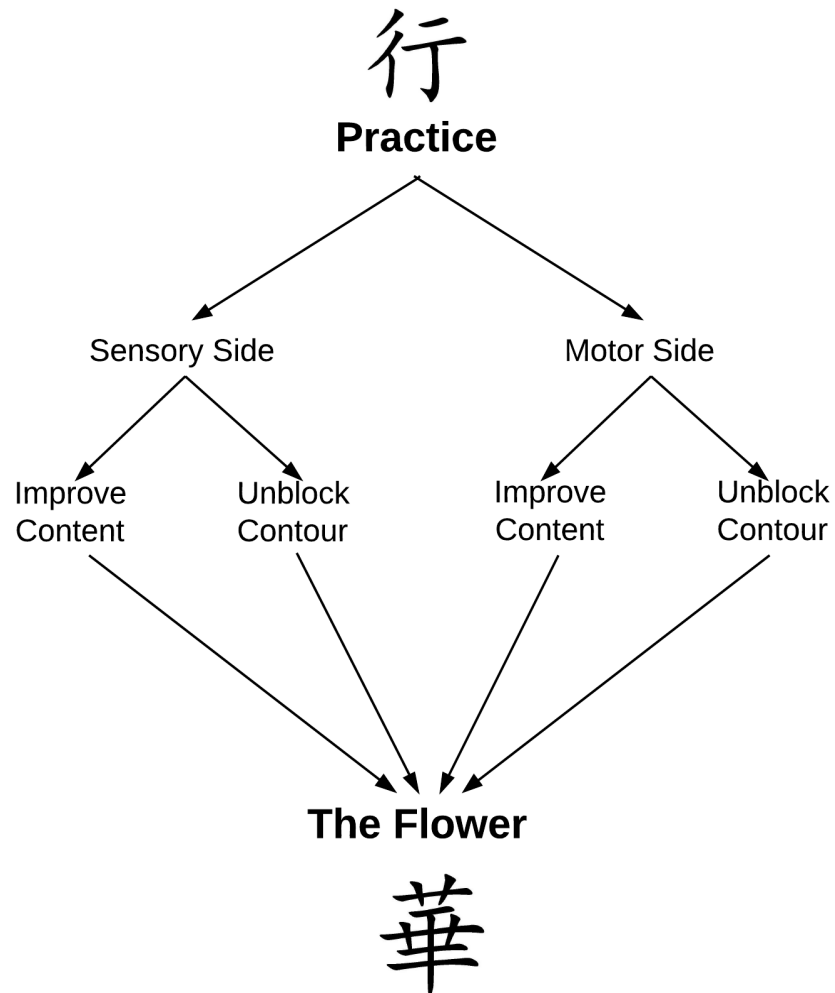
- [The Three Marks of Existence](#)
- [The Four Noble Truths](#)
- Suffering = Discomfort x Resistance
- Fulfillment = Pleasure x Equanimity
- No Self → No Problem
- Flow Self → No Problem
- Etc., etc.

But spiritual wisdom is also a specific way of knowing—a “wisdom function” which, once activated, arises continually and spontaneously within you.

In Buddhist iconography, liberating insight (*prajñā*) is symbolized by the bodhisattva [Mañjuśrī](#). In one hand he holds a book. In the other he holds a sword. The book represents wisdom as content—a record of deep insights. The sword represents wisdom as function, a way of knowing that cuts directly to the answer.

There’s an interesting parallel here with science. Our word science from the Latin word *scientia*, which literally means “the knowledge”. On one hand modern science is a specific body of knowledge—a collection of well-tested theories. On the other hand, it’s a specific way of getting knowledge—the scientific method.

Putting all these notions together, we can construct a truly comprehensive outline of practice.



**By “The Flower” I mean the flower of humanity—the full human flourishing that comes about when one’s substance conforms to the nature of nature and one's behavior conforms to the canons of humanity.**

# A Detailed Breakdown

## I. Sensory Side: Mindfulness

### A. Formal Practice

- Attention: All attention is on the technique.
- Duration: Practice period lasts at least 10 minutes.

#### 1. In Stillness

- Vanilla version
  - Default situation: sitting
  - Other common situations:
    - a. Standing
    - b. Lying down
    - c. Holding a yoga posture
- Accelerated versions
  - Same as vanilla version but in addition systematically expose yourself to a wide range of [triggers](#) or work to extend the [duration](#) of your sessions.

#### 2. In Motion

- Vanilla version
  - Default situation: walking
  - Other common situations:
    - a. Chanting
    - b. Eating
    - c. Exercise
    - d. Simple chores
- Accelerated versions
  - For a given technique, create a [challenge sequence](#). The goal is to eventually be able to “go deep” with that technique even while doing a complex activity.

### B. Life Practice

#### 1. Micro Practice

- Attention: All attention on technique.
- Duration: Under 10 minutes, i.e., you give yourself “microhits” during the day; 30 seconds here, 3 minutes there (emphasis must be quality over quantity; if need be use spoken labels to assure this).
- Motivation:
  - Interest - Before and/or after particularly pleasant situations.

- Opportunity – Dead times during the day (waiting for computer to reboot, walking to the washroom...) or times when you're full CPU is not needed (i.e., when listening to someone's vacuous banter...).
- Necessity – Before and/or after a particularly stressful event.
- Situation: Can be done in stillness (sit down, close your eyes, and Focus In before a stressful phone call) or in motion (Focus Out while you're walking to the water cooler).

## 2. Background practice

- Attention: Not necessarily much attention on the technique (it's sort of running on its own in the background).
- Duration: Any length of time (even most of the day).
- Motivation: Be somewhat more mindful throughout at least some parts of your day.
- Situation: Can be done in stillness (you're seated in a meeting) or in motion (you're driving while having a conversation with your passenger).

## II. Motor Side: Spontaneity

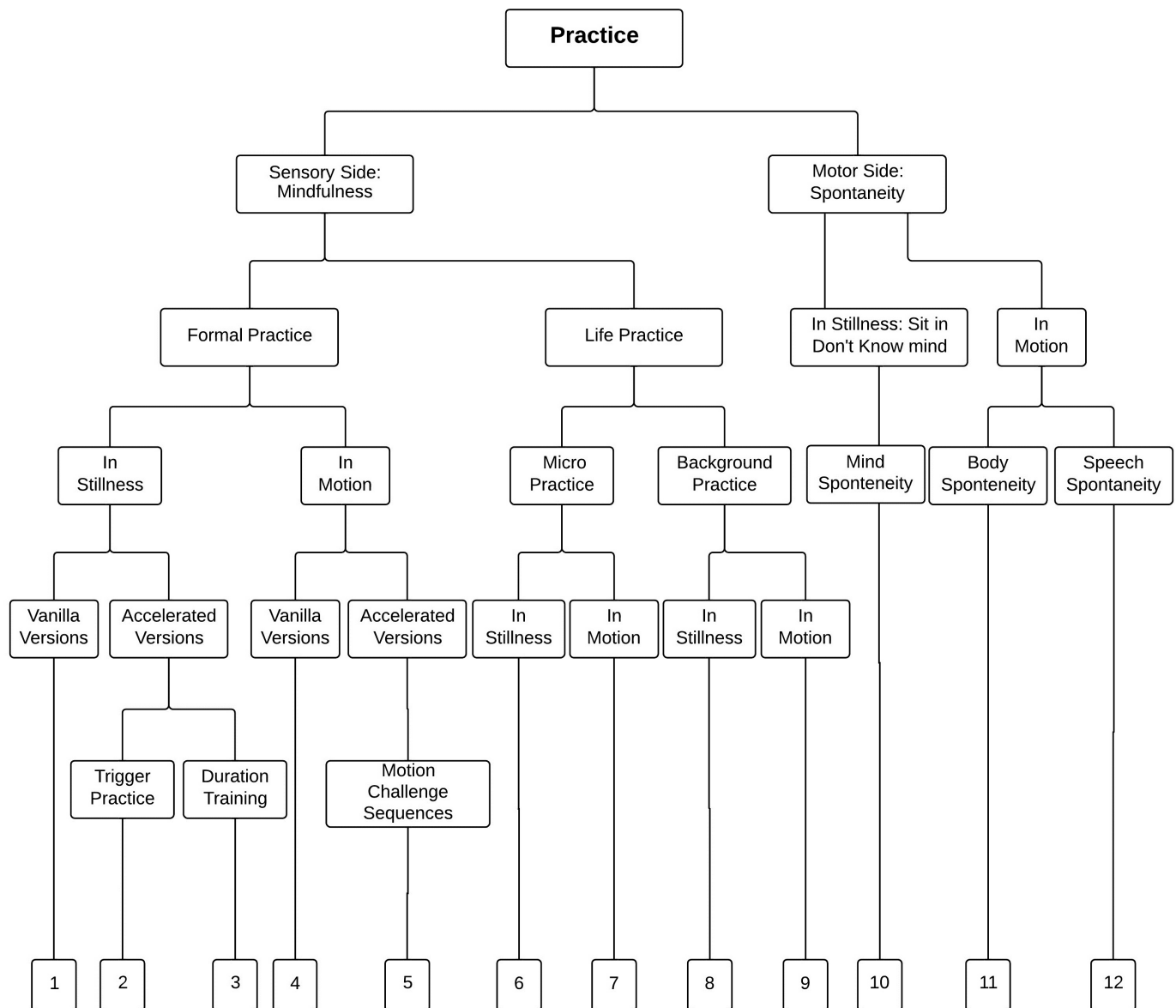
- A. In Stillness: Sitting in Don't Know mind leads to ability to "think without thinking", i.e., wisdom thoughts well up spontaneously once you have worked through the drive to think. (This is part, but not all, of what's involved in [kōan](#) practice.)
- B. In Motion:
  1. Body spontaneity: In Zen three words beginning with S foster this.
    - [Samu](#) – Zen work: Totally give yourself to the pure doing of the task. (Let the flow of expansion and contraction animate your limbs.)
    - [Sahō](#) – Ritualism: Once you master the elaborate forms, you can fall into the ritual—literally! No need to think; action just happens the way a raindrop just falls.
    - [Sanzen](#) – Interviews with the Rōshi during which he/she demonstrates effortless doing. Student's response rides on the shared flow of space.
  2. Speech spontaneity: Throw caution to the wind, start flapping your tongue and moving your lips with faith that coherent speech will self organize sooner or later.

## III. Further Notes

- A. Notice that any of the three approaches (formal practice, micropractice, background practice) can be implemented in either of 2 basic situations (in stillness or in motion).
- B. Here's a general suggestion for developing the spontaneity dimension of practice:  
A period of practice (one sit, a whole retreat), may leave you perceptually and/or conceptually disoriented. Instead of trying to reorient/reground yourself, do two things:
  - Have equanimity with the disorientation.
  - Start functioning despite it, i.e., act and speak from the state of Don't Know. You may be a little awkward at first but that passes.



# A Visual Summary



The above breakdown of practice yields 12 distinguishable practice situations. Paraphrasing Bill of Big Book fame: *Seldom have we seen someone fail who has implemented all 12 of these.*

# The Three Accelerators

## Introduction to the Accelerators

Two questions I frequently get asked are:

- Is there a way to speed up my growth in mindfulness?
- How can I maintain the deep place I get to during retreats after I return to daily life?

My standard answer for both of these questions is to suggest that people utilize what I call the Three Accelerators: Trigger Practice, Duration Training, and Challenge Sequences. The Three Accelerators have the effect of “pushing the envelope” of one’s practice.

## Trigger Practice

A good sports coach will encourage you to “train smart”. Trigger practice is a smart way to build mindfulness strength and endurance. It allows you to individually and systematically retrain each of your hot buttons before they get pressed in daily life. Here’s how it works.

In daily life, we frequently encounter situations that trigger thoughts and emotions—sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant; sometimes intense, sometimes subtle. Those thoughts and emotions may, in turn, lead to words and actions—sometimes appropriate and effective; other times inappropriate and less effective.

People often report that they don’t get much emotional body sensation or visual thought during periods of formal practice. On the other hand, emotional body sensation and visual thinking are often activated by life situations. But when that happens, we usually have to take care of the objective situation. This requires time and energy. So it may be difficult to systematically cultivate mindfulness and take care of business at the exact same time.

So how can we train ourselves to stay deeply mindful through the whole range of emotions and thoughts that come up in our daily life? One possible answer is Trigger Practice.

During Trigger Practice, you control the (1) type, (2) intensity, and (3) duration of stimulus you’d like to work with. You also control the (4) length of time between exposure to the stimulus. In other words: you have 4 independent variables you can tweak to optimize your training. Moreover, during trigger practice, there’s no actual situation you need to respond to. So you can direct all your energy to working with those triggers in a deeply mindful state. After this training, when things suddenly come up in daily life, you’ll find that you automatically go into a mindful response. This will reduce your suffering in unpleasant situations, increase your fulfillment in pleasant situations, and foster more effective behavior in all situations.

The basic structure of Trigger Practice is simple. You expose yourself to a sight, sound, or physical-type body sensation that would tend to create a mental and/or emotional reaction within you. The stimulus

could create a certain type of pleasant reactions (love, joy, interest...) or a certain type of unpleasant reaction (anger, fear, sadness, shame...). You vary the type, intensity, duration, and spacing of the stimulation so that you're working against an edge but not overloading yourself (as in weight training).

During and between the stimuli, you apply a formal technique. The technique can involve turning toward what's triggered or it can involve turning away from what's triggered. There's something to learn from either strategy. You can turn towards what's triggered by using one of the techniques from the Focus In family. You can turn away from what's triggered using Focus Out, Focus on Rest, Focus on Flow, or Nurture Positive.

Most people find listening to sound from the TV/Internet with eyes closed to be the easiest way to do Trigger Practice but there are many other possibilities. You can trigger reactions through sight only (for example, by listening to the TV/Internet with the sound off), or through physical body sensations (for example, the sensations associated with a hot tub, workout, etc.). See what patterns are interesting and productive for you. If you want to really challenge yourself, you can try 2 or even 3 of the physical sense triggers at once (for example, watch and listen to TV).

## Duration Training

Duration Training refers to learning how to maintain "practice in stillness" for longer and longer periods of time. By practice in stillness I mean formal practice where you don't move much or at all. One traditional form of Duration Training is known as [\*adhiṭṭhāna\*](#) (strong determination sitting [aka "breaking through a posture"]). In *adhiṭṭhāna*, you decide to sit for a period of time (1 hour, 2 hours, 3 hours, 4 hours, a day, a week...) with little or no voluntary movement. If you've never tried this, it may sound daunting if not impossible. But remember you can gradually work your way up to this sort of thing.

As I define it, "Duration Training" generalizes the practice of *adhiṭṭhāna* by allowing more leeway for customization. With regard to postures, you can do it sitting on floor, sitting in chair, standing in place, holding a yoga posture, or even lying down. With regard to voluntary motion, the options range from absolutely no voluntary motion at all (not even re-straightening your spine) to allowing for small posture adjustments to allowing for moving just enough to relieve pain or even briefly using the washroom.

For most types of duration training, pain and other forms of physical discomfort eventually become a major issue. I've spoken extensively on how to work with physical discomfort on the Internet in articles and YouTube segments.

If you're doing duration training in a lying down posture, there may be no physical discomfort but sleepiness and the temptation to move the body in small ways can become issues. If you're able to avoid sleepiness and willing to keep the body perfectly still, you can do lying down Duration Training for very long periods of time (say, 6-8 hours) with relative ease. The lying down version of Duration Training may seem wimpy relative to the seated or standing version but it can take you quite deep and

has a bit of a tradition. Lying down was the posture of choice for meditation in certain schools of Greek philosophy. The technical name for this was *incubatio*.

Here are a few guidelines to keep in mind when doing any form of Duration Training.

- Do nothing that would objectively damage the body (if you're limping for an hour after a sit, that's a sign you should have allowed yourself some micro-adjustments or utilized some other posture).
- You don't have to push the duration envelope during every sit (or even most sits) but it's good to do so at least occasionally. In other words, don't never sit past your current comfort point.
- The goal is to gradually work through all physical, mental, and emotional challenges that might arise as you extend a practice period, i.e., to reach the point where you could (in theory!) maintain the stillness posture indefinitely. (Don't freak out! You've got years, decades, to gradually learn how that's done.)

Duration training is based on a freeing perspective about how to achieve unconditional happiness. The assignment: "Find happiness independent of conditions!" is a daunting one. Where does one start? What direction do you turn towards in order to make that journey? It's difficult to get a tangible sense of how to go about getting unconditional happiness. On the other hand, the assignment: "gradually deconstruct all sources of unhappiness!" is tangible. You can do that through experiencing each source of unhappiness so fully that it literally becomes clarified, i.e., transparent and insubstantial. As pain, confusion, fear, and such, become transparent, the light of unconditional happiness, which was always there, can now shine through.

Recently at my retreats, we started designating a 4-hour block in the afternoon for (optional!) Duration Training. Surprisingly, it's turned out to be quite popular. For years we've offered the option to sit part or all of the night. Such extracurricular sitting is called *yaza* (夜坐) in Japanese Zen monasteries (*ya* 夜 = night; *za* 坐 = *zazen* = sitting practice). I wanted to have an analogous term for the duration training option, so I coined a Japanese neologism *yūza* (*yū* 雄 = heroic; *za* 坐 = sit).

## Motion Challenge

People often complain that they're able to get in deep states during formal practice but are not able to maintain those states in daily life. There's a lot to be said about this but one suggestion I have is to work smart by creating for yourself "challenge sequences."

The idea is simple.

Take any meditation technique you relate to and attempt to maintain it through a sequence of progressively more challenging activities. Stay with each stage for however long it takes you to get as deep as you were in the previous stage.

Here's an example.

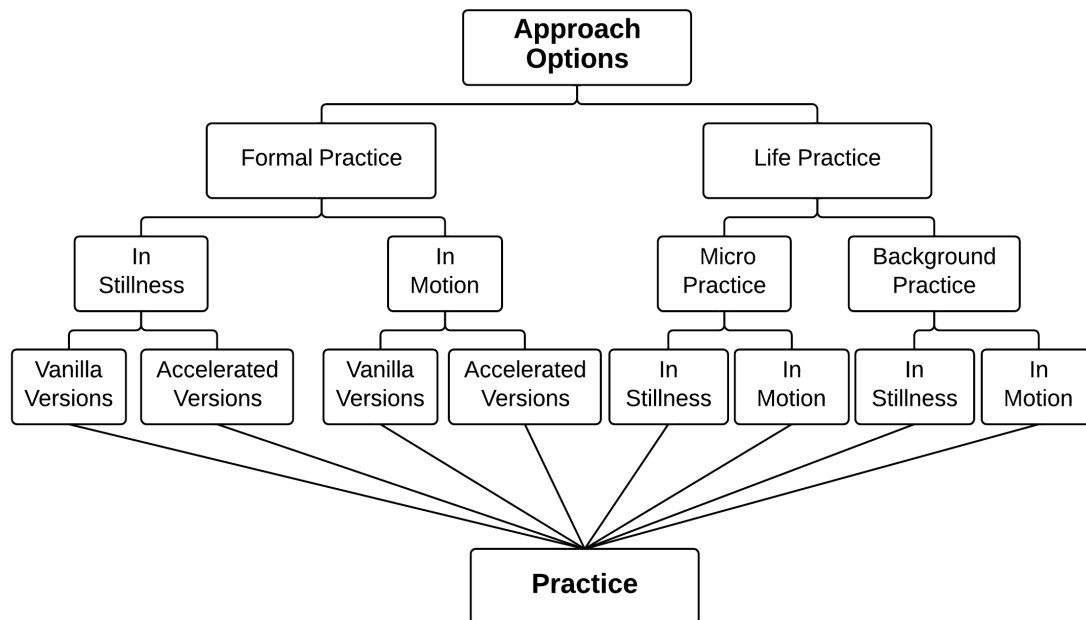
1. Lying down
2. Seated eyes closed
3. Seated eyes open
4. Standing
5. Slow walking
6. Faster walking
7. Walking in a sensorily impactful environment
8. Simple exercise
9. More complicated exercise
10. Washing dishes
11. Cooking a simple meal
12. Cooking a more complicated meal
13. Carrying on a vacuous conversation
14. Watching low-impact tv
15. Watching high impact tv
16. Carrying on a substantive conversation
17. Carrying on an emotionally charged substantive conversation

Your goal is to maintain the deepest state you can experience in #1 while in #17. It's like weight training, you build it up gradually. It may seem like an awful big homework assignment but you have the rest of your life to turn it in!

# A Facilitator's Checklist

The Outline of Practice presented above can serve as a useful framework for monitoring the “How Much” and “Under What Circumstances” aspects of a student's practice.

It implies eight basic approach options:



Here are some of the basic interrogatives needed to track a student's practice:

- ☒ What technique(s) is the student using?
- ☒ What happens when the student does a certain technique? (I.e., What windows are being opened? What walls are being hit?)
- ☒ How many of the standard options associated with a specific technique are they utilizing? (Hopefully the ones that optimize that student's growth!)
- ☒ How many of the above eight approach options are they utilizing? (Optimally, all!)
- ☒ For how long and how frequently are those technique and approach options being utilized?

Here's an example of what I mean by “standard options associated with a technique.” If a student's technique involves Noting, the standard options include:

## 1. Labeling Options

- Spoken labels
- Mental labels

- Direct awareness without intentional labels
2. Zooming Options
    - Zoom Out: Spread attention over the object you're noting.
    - Zoom In: Restrict attention to just one part of the object you're noting.
    - Zoom Both Ways: Go to the most intense part and at the same time cover the whole of its space.
    - Don't bother with any of the above.
  3. Re-Noting Options: Renote the same thing for a set number of times (or "Note 'Til Gone").
  4. Emphasis Options
    - Inclusive Emphasis: Note all components available at a given instant.
    - Exclusive Emphasis: Choose just one component to note at a given instant.
  5. Subdividing Options: Subdivide a standard category into sub-categories by type, location, etc. (i.e., divide "Feel In" into anger, fear, sadness, embarrassment, impatience disgust, interest, joy, love, gratitude, humor, smile, etc., etc.).

The above checklist allows a facilitator to query a student's practice in a systematic and thorough way. By that I mean ask questions like:

*Last week how frequently and for how long did you do formal practice in stillness?*

*Last week how frequently and for how long did you do formal practice in motion?*

*Do you ever do Duration Training?*

*How many micro-hits of practice did you give yourself yesterday?*

*Under what circumstances did you do them?*

*What was the effect?*

Or carry out an effective probe process:

**Facilitator:** *What technique do you usually practice?*

**Student:** *Focus In.*

**F:** *When you do that technique, what, if anything, gives you a problem?*

**S:** *I get lost in my thoughts a lot.*

**F:** *When that happens, do you use spoken labels?*

**S:** *No.*

**F:** *Are you familiar with what that option refers to?*

**S:** *Yes, I just forgot.*

**F:** *Okay, fine. I'd like you to start using that option for a while. Let me know if it helps or not.*