

Pacing and Leading Yourself in Meditation  
by Laurie Senauke

*"Breathing in a long breath, one is aware, 'I am breathing in a long breath.' Breathing out a long breath, one is aware, 'I am breathing out a long breath.' Breathing in a short breath, one is aware, 'I am breathing in a short breath. Breathing out a short breath, one is aware, 'I am breathing out a short breath..." - Shakyamuni Buddha*

Is that hypnotic language or what?

I've been practicing Zen meditation for 36 years, and studying hypnotherapy for about 3 years. I've noticed a parallel between the NLP and Ericksonian concept of pacing and leading and Buddha's Four Foundations of Mindfulness, a seminal Buddhist meditation instruction.

Pacing and leading refers to our practice in hypnotherapy of first connecting with the client's current experience and behavior, before introducing any suggestions for change. Pacing includes a host of processes, e.g., matching the client's breathing and eye-blink rates, using the same predicates (visual, auditory, kinesthetic), and generally doing whatever you can to connect with your client *wherever they are at*, and nurture rapport. Leading is to then find skillful ways to support and encourage change, according to the goals of the client. To quote Steven Gilligan in the book, *Therapeutic Trances* (p. 93):

*Pacing communications feed back the client's expressions; they add no new content to the interchange. Their major purpose is to enhance rapport. . . Pacing is essential for effective communications; it establishes a "common-unity" context in which autonomous systems can cooperate within an experientially unified field.*

*In addition to pacing, The Ericksonian practitioner also leads by introducing distinctions (e.g., behaviors) different from, but consistent with , the client's present state, and which move towards a desired state. ...successful leading requires adequate pacing.*

In the Buddha's teaching on the four foundations of mindfulness, the first three foundations - mindfulness of body/breath, mindfulness of feelings, and mindfulness of mind-states - correspond to pacing. The fourth foundation, mindfulness of 'dharma,' points to leading. First we thoroughly connect with what's happening in our immediate experience; only after that (after establishing 'rapport' with ourself, so to speak) do we bring in our practice goals, like "letting go", "generosity," or "loving-kindness." It is then and only then that we reflect on our teachers' instructions, or *anything* from the vast ocean of Dharma teachings. To me, Buddha's presentation reveals something about the balance of pacing and leading, something like: three-quarters pacing to one-quarter leading.

In hypnotherapy, we want to build rapport and help our client feel safe and easeful first. Really, the whole principle is that our habits and beliefs change more easily in a non-ordinary state, fostered through rapport and relaxation, among other techniques. And the same is true for meditation. By first *connecting deeply* with our own breath and posture, how we are feeling, and our state of mind, we settle into a mind where dharma seeds that are sown can fall on receptive mind-ground. This way, we are not just using our teachers' (and the ancestors') words to manage, direct, or force change according to the ego's and/or anxiety-based desires, goals and strategies.

Settling myself in this way, I can notice when I am harboring a subtle goal of changing my state of body or mind during meditation, before I even know exactly what it is. Once I've connected with myself at this deep level, I may find that actually not much else needs to be done; or I may realize that the "leading" that is called for is completely different from what I originally had in mind. Try it!