



# Meditation

*A Way of Awakening*

Ajahn Sucitto

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## **Preliminaries**

### **Why meditate?**

If you're reading this guide, maybe you're curious as to why people meditate. Why do they sit still and upright in silence for long periods of time? What are they thinking about? Is it some kind of religion; if so, what do they believe in? Well, it may be that some meditators are deliberately thinking along certain lines; and some may have profound faith in a God or a Truth. But then again, it is possible to meditate without these. To put it simply, what it all boils down to is finding peace of mind – within the mind itself. That the mind is the proper place for that search becomes evident when one acknowledges that, despite many technological, medical and social developments, humanity is profoundly stressed and troubled.

So, what are the roots of violence, selfishness and mistrust? Why, when we have so much in one sense, do we experience alienation and depression? And how do joy and compassion arise? These are some of the vital questions for which meditation may help you to discover personal answers.

What follows are guidelines on meditation that are in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha from some 2,500 years ago. The timeless quality of these teachings is such that they encourage us to look into states of discontent and stress in order to understand and remove the causes. The accomplishment of this is called 'Enlightenment' or 'Awakening.' However with even preliminary steps along the path to

Awakening, a meditator can clear out a lot of stuff in the mind that causes anxiety, depression, stress, and limits his or her happiness and personal understanding.

So the answer to ‘Why meditate?’ is as obvious as ‘Why be happy?’ It’s based on a natural interest in one’s welfare. Most of us at some time or another look to get an overview of our lives, or of our mental/emotional states, in order to find either a direction forward or a stable place within ourselves. Meditation exercises help us to do just this, through the development of steady introspective attention, otherwise known as ‘**mindfulness and clear comprehension**’ (*sati-sampajañña*). ‘Mindfulness’ is a steady attention to a particular experience, while ‘clear comprehension’ is the comprehension that can occur when this attention is steady. Clear comprehension fully attunes to the specific but changing character of a sensation, feeling, mood or thought. Taken together then, mindfulness and clear comprehension offer a way of maintaining a direct view of one’s inner life a moment at a time. This is Buddhist meditation. It offers us a way to get to know ourselves directly and in depth.

### **Meditate on what?**

Most often, what Buddhist meditation focuses on are the senses and sensations of our bodies and the behaviour and awareness of our minds – where we experience suffering or ease. Body and mind: the very basis of what we feel ourselves to be. Yet although we know what the body and the mind can do, most of the time we only have a superficial understanding of their basic nature and how to support their well-being. Because of a lack of awareness, people damage their bodies through, for example, harmful sitting and working postures. And the mind gets swept up in and overwhelmed by sights, sounds, touches, thoughts and moods – especially by its emotions and thoughts.

In the Buddhist sense of the word, ‘mind’ is not just a thinking organ, rather its central aspect is awareness, a sensitivity that responds to thoughts and emotions. Therefore, this mental awareness ‘learns’ psychological behaviour such as generosity and trust, or aversion and

wilfulness. As a result, psychological tendencies and mental habits get established which mould our lives for good or for bad. Therefore, in order to establish peace within the mind, it's necessary to understand both the nature of mental awareness – this mind or 'heart' (*citta*) – and the behaviour that it adopts. Awareness receives impressions of feelings of pleasure and pain, and is moved to sensing them as 'friendly,' 'uncertain,' and all the rest. This is where mental behaviour begins; it continues by consequently generating reactions and responses, reaching out or withdrawing, doubting, worrying and so on. We're then aware of all this behaviour – and that triggers further responses.

If we establish an overview of this flow of mind, certain truths become obvious. If we think in malicious or greedy ways, then we're never content. If we get caught in depression or inflation, suffering is going to follow for ourselves and others. On the other hand, attitudes and considerations in line with honesty, calm or kindness leave a positive effect. By observing the workings of this principle of cause and effect (called '*kamma*') we unlock the potential for joy and compassion, as well as clarity and stability. Meditation, as a skill of observation, gives us the overview of the causes that our minds generate, and their effects; as a healing response it enables us to relinquish what harms us, and to contact and bring forth what is good and enriching. There is nothing more essential to learn in order to live life well.

To look at this in more detail: there are three areas in our mental behaviour which lead to stress or harmony. Firstly, there are aims which, if they are confused or short-sighted, lead to harming ourselves or others. Careful reflection can help us realize that actions whose aims are violent, deceitful or intoxicating are harmful to the sensitive nature of the mind. Acting on these tendencies makes us lose clarity and self-respect and weaken concern and respect for others. Yet people follow these inclinations because they don't reflect on the potential harm of these effects; or, because they are not in touch with more supportive values. Meditation gives us a good aim: to be clear and attentive to what we're doing and how we're being affected in a moment-by-moment way.

Secondly, there is the issue of how we react to what we come into contact with. Daily life provides many opportunities for being in touch with sights and sounds that leave one feeling tense, distracted, and unbalanced. When we lose our inner balance, we have to rely on external support and stimulation to keep us going. This leaves us wide open to whatever pointless or harmful influences are being put out in the world around us: violence, fear, reckless excitement and greed are themes frequently on display, whether one wishes to participate in them or not. Buddhist meditation helps us to choose what contact is appropriate. As an exercise we can focus on the sensations in the body or our moods and mindsets to bring us into the present moment. Through this we begin to understand how we're being affected and how we're responding, and we do so in a way that supports clarity and calm.

The third factor of imbalance and stress is that of means. It may be that we have a wrong grasp of how to do something, or insufficient skill or that we are lacking in attention. When any of these are the case, even attempts to be helpful go wrong and lead to misunderstanding. One may not have been fully aware of the specifics of a situation – of the right time, the right place and the character of other people involved. Good intentions can fall short of achievement or get horribly misunderstood if one isn't aware of the best means with which to carry them out.

Meditation encompasses a range of skilful means to clear out misguided aims and unskilful responses. What all these skilful means have in common is that they train us to attend to body and mind with clarity, care and respect. Action based on clarity, care and respect is the most reliable way to relate to any living thing, and training in that has to begin with ourselves. In meditation, we do just this – in a thorough and in-depth way.

### **Three basic attitudes for meditation**

However one meditates, three basic attitudes should always be to the fore. These are goodwill, empathy and letting go. The first two attitudes relax any ill will and harshness and so relax and brighten the tone of the mind. Letting go means getting more free and spacious. It means simplifying

input in terms of quantity, in order to improve the quality of how we receive it and how we respond. Letting go is about gaining ease and clarity – and because of these one consequently doesn't need a whole lot of stuff to lift the heart.

Whether the stress is caused by anger, bereavement, anxiety or a sense of inadequacy, the key to clearing it is through letting go. In meditation, 'letting go' means attending to and relaxing the tension, the resistance or the flurrying in the mind. Otherwise, we simply add other thoughts and sensations to the stress and irritation in an attempt to dismiss or hide it. But by adding more stuff to the mix, we're not actually finding our way out of our mental dilemma. Applying suppression or will power doesn't help either. So 'letting go' means holding and contemplating a troubled or stressful state in an attentive and empathic way. The very quality of that attention replaces the resistance or the demand that the mind was making; and there is a corresponding sense of release and relief.

The first step in any letting go is 'stepping back' – **non-involvement** (*viveka*). This initiates letting go by unhooking the mind from the topic that is stirring it up. It's not a matter of avoiding or suppressing the topic, but of seeing it in a clear and spacious way. Non-involvement is about settling back into the present moment, relaxing into the way things are right now; it's about letting go of the 'shoulds' and 'shouldn'ts,' the past, the future and the imaginary, and meeting things as they arise in the present. But it takes some doing. Letting go needs to be supported by a steady and focused mindfulness and clear comprehension. These provide the means whereby we can attend to what is happening now without trying to fix it. We learn to feel pleasure or pain as mental events, rather than go into the reactions of irritation or grasping or whatever to such feelings. In this way, we check the feedback loop between behaviour and awareness, so that the mind finds a calm and steady place in the midst of changing feelings. This is the result of letting go.

Letting go is also about giving things time to shift and settle, and being patient with oneself. It's about not comparing yourself with others, and



letting go of self-images. Letting go makes us more flexible and broad-minded. It's grounded in the understanding that things change; and that they can change for the better if we're attentive, mindful, and put aside distractions and negativity.

As we're working on the basis of our behaviour, meditation also pertains to how we relate to others. An aware reference to one's own body and mind requires and trains attention to be empathic: when one is aware of how one's own wishes and worries happen, one is more likely to have compassion and concern for others. Then, even if we witness acts of violence or events that can give rise to fear or despair, if we have right aim and skilful means we can contemplate such things with a mind that does not get taken over by panicky or despondent reactions.

### **Why not?**

I'd always recommend that someone who wishes to develop meditation should seek the advice of like-minded friends and, where possible, an experienced and trusted teacher. Although the overview will help keep the whole picture in mind, the teacher will provide each pupil with more accurate and specific advice in terms of details of the ongoing process. Then he or she can help one to respond to the ongoing requirements and developments of meditation. However, in the following guide, I've tried to act as a teacher who can respond to the standard difficulties and recommend further developments when they become possible.

For some people there may be reasons why introspective and concentrated meditation is not suitable, or needs to be approached with caution. A suitable reason for caution is if the chemistry of the brain is out of balance, giving rise to over-whelming emotional or psychological states. If one is using medication to maintain mental balance, it is not advisable to suspend the medication without guidance from one's doctor, therapist or teacher. Still, even if one isn't able to practise extended meditation in long retreats, the practice of mindfulness and reflection can form the basis for an ethical and attuned life.

On the other hand, physical disabilities are not an insurmountable problem, and many chronically disabled people find enormous benefit and relief from pain through cultivating the foundations of mindfulness.

So...the first question to ask about developing mindfulness and clear comprehension is: why not? If you feel it's worth a try, then let's get started.

### **How to use this guide**

What follows is a series of texts; most are just tools, step-by-step instructions. They are grouped in three parts in a way that is approximately progressive. (Of course how exactly you progress depends on you.) The three parts of the book respectively cover the domains of body, mental behaviour (in other words, mind-states, emotions and impulses) and mental awareness. In general, the advice would be to take on the practices in that order, although it isn't always essential to be completely proficient in every detail before moving on. It's likely that some readers need one instruction, others need another; and as I've tried to suit a broad range of people, it's likely there's more detail in some of these instructions than any one person needs. It could well be the case that the practices of kindness (end of Part One) and self-acceptance (beginning of Part Three) need to be given priority attention early on, but I'd always recommend the ground-work of mindfulness of body, as that can serve as a reliable mooring post for the mind no matter what the mood or approach.

As I don't know you, I'd also add the note: 'It all depends.' What use you make of these instructions depends on how your mind works, on what your strengths and needs are. As you experiment with what is offered, you'll get to find these for yourself. Each section simply lays out some instructions, then gives guidance on some of the common difficulties that you may experience in carrying out the instructions. I present the theme, such as mindfulness of walking, and a few techniques. The techniques are variable, but the themes are the basis.

Following on from the initial presentation come two alternatives: first, if this exercise really doesn't work for you (please be patient and take it slowly) then there may be something similar that is more suitable for you at this time. The other possibility (which may be accessible to you within a few weeks, or may take years) is to develop the exercise further. At this juncture I have to say that you'll benefit, and only really benefit, from working steadily, repeatedly and manageably at an exercise. Begin with ten to fifteen minutes on a daily basis, and work towards getting a full half-hour. In that way you'll find yourself interested in establishing a regular daily practice and building it up from there for longer periods of time.

Here and there in this guide are articles which present aspects of the overarching theory, maps if you like, that link these practical instructions into the larger scheme of the Buddha's teachings. These are titled 'Theory.' Right tools and reference to the map should give you confidence in the direction of the practice. Furthermore, there are sections that look into the 'Process' of the practice, and these are titled in that way. The process refers to either the familiar difficulties that one has to pass through, or the more rewarding aspects of the landscape of the mind that one may arrive at and find wisdom and confidence in. Both the positive and the negative aspects of the landscape offer the same calming insight: none of this is yours alone, others have come this way; let whatever arises pass on in peace.

*Ajahn Sucitto*  
*Cittaviveka 2011*

**PS** ~ For those of you who are interested in the sayings of the Buddha, I've added relevant quotes here at the head of some sections. These are extracted from: A- Numerical Discourses; D - Long Discourses; DhP - Dhammapada; M - Middle Length Discourses; S - Connected Discourses; Snp - Sutta-Nipāta.

Part One:  
Establishing The Ground



*Wisdom springs from meditation,  
without meditation wisdom declines.*

DHAMMAPADA 282



## Tuning In to Peace

Meditation can be a very deep enquiry into the mind. It can be undertaken in intensive retreats, wherein subtle features of the way the mind works, and levels of mind that don't get normally get accessed, can come to light. However, meditation is also something that we can practise in a lunch-break or when returning home from work as a skilful means to regain balance and to stay centred in daily life. What follows is an introduction with which to get started.



Sit still in a quiet and settled place in a way that feels comfortable. Relax your eyes, but let them stay open or half-open, with a relaxed gaze. Be aware of the sensation of your eyeballs resting in the eye-sockets (rather than focusing on what you can see). Be sensitive to the tendency for the eyes to fidget, and keep relaxing that. As an alternative, you may find it helpful to let your gaze rest, in a relaxed way, on a suitable object – such as a view into the distance.

Then bring your attention to the sensations of your hands, then your jaw and tongue. See if they, too, can take a break from being on guard. Let your tongue rest in the floor of your mouth. Then sweep that relaxing attention from the corners of the eyes and around the head, as if you were unfastening a headscarf. Let the scalp feel free.

Let your eyes close. As you relax all around your head and face, bring that quality of attention, slowly, gradually, down over your throat. Loosen up there, as if allowing each out-breath to sound an inaudible drone.

Keeping in touch with these places in your body, be aware of the flow of thoughts and emotions that pass through the mind. Listen to them as if you're listening to flowing water, or the sea. If you find yourself reacting to them, bring your attention to the next out-breath, continuing to relax through the eyes, the throat and the hands.

If you feel like extending this, sweep that attention down your body to the soles of your feet. In this way, build up a whole sense of the body at ease.

While maintaining awareness of the overall presence of your body, practise stepping back from, or letting go of, any thoughts and emotions that arise. Don't add to them; let them pass. Whenever you do that, notice the sense of spaciousness, however brief, that seems to be there, behind the thoughts and feelings. Attune to the peacefulness of that.

Feel the peaceful quality of that spaciousness, and take it in. Take a few long, slow out-breaths sensing your breath flowing out into the space around you; let the in-breath begin by itself. Sense how the in-breath draws in from the space around you. Attune to the rhythm of that process. You can support this reference to the breathing process by asking: 'How is my breathing now?'

It's also useful to think slowly and carefully in ways that calm or gladden the heart. Bring to mind any instances of people's actions that have touched you in a positive way, in terms of kindness, or patience, or understanding. Repeatedly touch the heart with a few specific instances, dwelling on the feeling that it evokes.

Stay with the most deeply felt recollection for a minute or two, with a sense of curiosity: 'How is this affecting me?' Sense any effect in terms of heart: there may be a quality of uplift, or of calming, or of firmness. You may even detect a shift in your overall body tone. Allow yourself all the time in the world to be here with no particular purpose other than to feel

how you are in this way. Dwell upon and expand awareness of any sense of vitality, stillness, comfort or spaciousness.

When it's time to conclude the meditation, keep attuned in a peaceful way. First feel how you are in bodily terms. Then notice what inclinations and attitudes seem natural and important when you are dwelling in your place of value. Then bring those to your daily-life situation by asking: 'What is important to me now?' 'What matters most?' Then give yourself time to let the priorities of action establish themselves in accordance with that.



## **Difficulties**

If you can't check distracting thoughts, or if you feel bothered by what's going on around you, you may benefit from finding a more conducive setting for meditation – somewhere that gives you a supportive mood. It could be somewhere in nature, a quiet corner of your room, or a meeting place with like-minded friends. Keeping your eyes open will help to keep your mind from getting engrossed in thought.

It's also good to precede a meditation period, which may be of fifteen to twenty minutes, with relaxing and refreshing yourself with bathing and gentle exercise.

Meditation, and being at peace with ourselves, is more fulfilling when we integrate it with how we live. That is, acknowledging the effects of harmful speech, we learn to be more careful. Putting aside drink or drugs, and limiting how much time gets spent working and living at high speed, leads to more balanced energies in body and mind. But because everything we do has its effects, it's also the case that if we have friends who bring warmth and joy into the heart, and if we have no regrets and can feel content with how we're living – then the mind is going to feel a lot brighter and steadier.



## **If this form doesn't help you...**

You may benefit from exercises like Hatha Yoga, or Qi Gong.



### **Further**

To add to the sense of 'tuning in,' use some sound. Begin with breathing out with your larynx open to make a sound something between a drone and a sigh. Listen to the sound and to the mood that it invokes. Tune into that, amplifying it and adjusting it with each long out-breath to make a sound that sounds like its coming from an emotive place within you. Don't try to make it beautiful or operatic; the aim is to listen to the mood, not to make much out of the note.

As you do this, let your attention rest for several minutes in the following places: the lower abdomen, the centre of the chest, the throat, and the forehead above and between the eyes. Gradually decrease the intensity and volume of the sound and 'listen' to these places in your body.

## Theory: Embodiment

*Just as someone who mentally encompasses the great ocean will include in that all the rivers that run into the ocean, so...whoever develops mindfulness directed to the body will include in that all the skilful states that support supreme understanding. [A. 1.11]*

We can sit, stand, walk or even lie down to meditate. Meditation centres on mindfulness, the views and efforts that support it and the skills and deepening that it allows. Mindfulness is a form of concentration, whereby one's attention is sustained on an object – such as breathing – or in terms of a theme – such as kindness. It's the ability to bear a certain object or theme in mind. In the practice of meditation, mindfulness is generally trained and strengthened by sustaining it with regards to four foundations or bases: of **body**; of **feeling** (physical or mental pain or pleasure); of **mental states** (such as anger or joy) and **mental processes** (such as an evolved pattern of ill will, or on the other hand of mindfulness). But this doesn't mean that you have to keep shifting your attention from this base to that: you can be mindful of all four of these while being focused on bodily experience, notably on mindfulness of breathing.

This is because our consciousness is holistic – where you focus on the body, mind and feelings will be there. It's more a matter of which window you choose to look in through. When our looking is accompanied by mindfulness, we notice moods, motivations and energies that may normally escape our attention. This is valuable, because it is in the underlying strata of the mind that a lot of our strengths and beauty, as well as our negative tendencies, lie.

To penetrate beneath the surface of mental activity takes practice and patient effort. For a start, it means determining to put aside other topics for the period of the meditation. It also means not getting caught up in feelings and mind-states that arise as one meditates. Almost certainly, one will remember various things one had to do, or drift off into speculation or fantasies about the future or the past. This is captivating – but, in terms of meditation at least, a distraction. In meditation we’re looking to get behind this surface spin in order to steady the mind and deepen understanding.

However, even when we know this, the mind can still slip away at the speed of a thought and without giving a moment’s notice. This means that we have to choose something useful to bear in mind – and to put some effort into staying with it – in order to keep to the fore an object or theme that supports clear, empathic, or stabilising states of mind. One of the fundamental ways of bringing the mind into the present moment is to focus on how we sense our own body. This bodily sense – that is awareness of the sensations and energies that manifest in the body – is something immediate that we can contemplate. It gives us ground and balance. It gives us the sense of being where we are. Although this may seem basic and obvious, much of the time we are not grounded in where we really are. Instead we are ‘out there’ in a world of changing circumstance and reactions to that, without having a central reference.

Using mindfulness of the body as a centring reference is a good all-round standard for everyone. It’s solid and obvious. And not only does embodiment provide us with a reliable place to be, but it is the source of the facts that govern our life – pleasure and pain, sensitivity and vulnerability, and the rhythms of nature that make us hungry and tired. The heart is affected and the mind creates its basic strategies in relationship to these rhythms of nature. So we get to the source of much behaviour and instinct when we are mindful of the body.

Furthermore, the Buddha’s instructions on mindfulness emphasize that we should ‘directly know the body in the body’ – that is, in its own terms,

not in terms of our attitudes or phobias about it. (This instruction is repeated in terms of the other three foundations, which we shall explore in due course.) So this affects the way the mind operates by cutting off its commentaries, fantasies and proliferating tendencies.

One result of mindfulness is calm. The body carries, and can be relieved from, the circumstantial stresses and tension of daily life. If the body feels relaxed and bright, then the mind and heart settle readily; if it's numb, slack or tense, it is difficult to find the energy that is needed for meditation. Conversely, when we find a balanced bodily state and meditate on that, energy is restored to the whole system, and we can feel positive and enriched. If attention can be gathered into this bodily sense, it is withheld from preparing for the variables of the future and the past, juggling duties and inclinations, or being gripped with concerns over oneself and others. This withholding allows attention to settle into a more peaceful balance in the present.

Good posture plays a big part in that process, because it gives the mind something to apply itself to and develop skills around. It also puts the body into a position wherein its energies tend to circulate in a bright and calm way. The 'good' of good posture is not about an outward appearance; it's that which remedies stagnation or tension. However, the balanced alertness of good posture doesn't come around through bodily effort alone. It is a matter of settling the body into balance with a steady and sensitive attitude. The patience and care with which we develop good posture is a development for the mind in its own right: rather than forcing ourselves to sit up straight, we're learning to massage, give and relax our attention to attune to a poised alertness.

A moment-by-moment application is needed. This is done through a '**bringing to mind**' or conceiving (*vitakka*) of the meditation topic. This generally entails a degree of thought or at least of thoughtfulness. Bringing to mind is backed up by **evaluation** (*vicāra*) which is the thoughtful listening to, resonating with and assessment of what has been brought to mind. *Vitakka* points and *vicāra* handles and 'gets the sense' of

what is being pointed to. The first is like picking up an apple; the second is admiring it, turning it around and appreciating it. When these are in place, what arises is a quality of awareness that is clear, stable and receptive: mindfulness and clear comprehension.

The right kind of effort for bearing something in mind is the persistent and calm attention that focuses and keeps returning to the chosen object. With this understanding, we learn to moderate between massive efforts of will, which may have short-term benefits but be unsustainable in the long run, and a gentler and encouraging persistence, which sometimes needs to be fired up to deal with tenacious mental habits. Through this we encourage many skilful mental processes, including factors of investigation, of effort, and of inner happiness. Much of the work of Awakening can be summarized as the development of this fourth base of mindfulness. With this we cultivate an astute and beneficial way of relating to body, feelings and mind-states.

As was previously mentioned, mindfulness of body supports a clear mind and vice versa; the practice has a balanced tone. This tonality unifies all Buddhist cultivation – which includes ethical standards and compassion, as well as calm and wisdom. All of these take wholesomeness and inner well-being as their keynote and develop it along particular lines. This cultivation shows us that our richest potential arises in accordance with inclinations such as kindness, patience and clear attention. And if we know how to access this potential in our own hearts, then we can act, speak and meditate in ways that bring greater clarity and well-being into our lives. In ourselves we can realize the essence of the Buddha's Awakening.

## **Sitting Meditation**

Sit on the floor with the legs crossed, or in a straight-backed or backless chair so that the posture is steady and the spine is upright. Whether you sit in a chair or sit on the floor with legs crossed is less significant than attending to the upright spinal axis. If the spine is stressed by having the shoulders leaning in on it, or the head hunched forward, or the lower back bent out, it is impossible for it to fully support the body. To sit in an upright posture and fully sense the body brings energy into the mind. Good posture is therefore an important basis for meditation.

### **Aligning bodily structure**

If you're using a chair, take care to keep the soles of both feet placed flat on the floor; rest the thighs on the seat of the chair and refrain from leaning back. Keep your legs apart to allow the base of the body to rest firmly on the surface of the chair. If you're sitting on the floor, sit cross-legged with one foot resting on top of the opposite thigh with the other foot tucked under its opposite thigh ('half-lotus'); or, rest both feet on the opposite thighs ('full lotus'). If your flexibility isn't up to that, never mind. Use any cross-legged position, or even sit on your haunches with your legs going forwards and your calves folded under your thighs. The important thing is to feel steady and be upright in a manageable way. In any case, sit so that the small of the back is slightly concave, with the lower abdomen perpendicular. This should balance your pelvis on two bony structures at its base, called 'sitting bones': you can locate them where the under-thigh of each leg swells into each buttock. So, if you're sitting in one of the 'lotus' postures you may need to use a small firm cushion or pad wedged under your tailbone to support the balance on

these sitting bones. With these, you just use the edge of the cushion to check the backwards tilt of the pelvis. Then the weight of the body is transferred down through the broad base of the lower pelvis and the upper thighs.

Draw the lower edges of the shoulder blades in to counteract the tendency to hunch; then the chest will open and the shoulders relax. At first this will seem like you are pulling a point between the lower tips of the shoulder blades in towards your chest; then it becomes more like an inclination for that part of the spine to meet the heart; eventually it just feels natural. In this posture the breathing is deep, steady and clearly discernible. This carriage of the chest and shoulders will tend to align the neck with the rest of the spine. The neck is a continuation of the spine: it belongs to the back rather than the head. Counteract the tendency for the head to capture the neck and pull it forward by first relaxing the jaw, and then drawing the head back so that the skull and the neck are in alignment with the back. The chin will tuck in towards the throat. All of this frees the body from the habitual locks that bad posture introduces. Breathe slowly and fully and attune to the effects in terms of the chest and abdomen; these should move when you breathe: the abdomen goes in and out; the chest rises and expands sideways – slightly. If this doesn't happen, the posture is still locked somewhere.

Let the palms of your hands rest on your legs just above the knees or at the mid-thigh. Feel out any tension in the arms and hands and steadily drain that down from the shoulders through the arms and legs into the ground. Let the weight of the body descend evenly down through the pelvic region. Taking care not to draw the arms in to close the chest, the hands may turn so that the backs of one set of fingers rests in the palm and fingers of the other hand. You can also remain in the previous posture if you wish.

### **'Sweeping' the body**

When the posture is established, it's good to keep sweeping your attention over the body. In this way we can both supervise the posture (it's easy for

it to slip out of balance) and deepen overall awareness. You can do this by focusing on the overall sense of the body and then ‘tuning in’ to any places that feel tight or have drifted out of awareness. At a later stage, when the posture feels more assured, you can do a more methodical ‘point-at-a-time’ sweep from your head down and gradually over your entire body. This methodical sweep can take up to an hour, or even more!

Another benefit from ‘body-sweeping’ is that it trains the mind to be attentive, strengthens mindfulness by bearing details of bodily experience in mind, and enhances an attitude of gentle, undemanding attention to the body. The tools for mindfulness and gentleness are the mental ‘acts’ of bringing to mind and evaluating. Bringing to mind is like asking: ‘How do I know I have a left hand right now?’ or, ‘Where’s my neck?’ Evaluating is like asking: ‘How does it feel?’ ‘What’s happening there?’ ‘What attitude is occurring towards that part of the body?’ This ‘checking-in’ can reveal attitudes of forcefulness or indifference and replace them with mindfulness and care.

First attend to the overall ‘feel’ of the posture: we can overdo the vigour and underestimate sensitivity. A common error in this respect is to pull the lumbar spine in (pushing the buttocks out) which creates a sense of strength, but over-exerts the lower back muscles. Or, we may try to hold ourselves upright with the shoulders, over-exerting the upper back. Both of these will cause stress. Rather than use one part of the back to hold everything, attend to the whole upright carriage: specifically that the pelvis is balanced on the sitting bones, the sacrum is upright, the spine between the shoulders is concave and the head is balanced on the upright neck. Give yourself the allowance to move a little, wriggling and adjusting the posture to get the body to feel and find its balance. Keep giving attention to the specific points in the body as well as the overall effects in terms of body and mind. Give yourself time to settle.

The head and neck can carry a lot of tension, so in settling into the body our initial aim is to undo this. Tension blocks sensitivity and naturally leads to rigidity and dullness of mind. Loosen the head on the neck by



relaxing the jaw and imagining the skull can float upwards. Imagine plenty of space between the chin and the chest so that although the chin is tilted slightly downwards, it doesn't shield the throat. Relax the tongue in the floor of the mouth (even an unconscious pushing up with the back of tongue will send a charge of tension into the occiput). Then relax the tissues around the eyeballs, and keeping the eyes open, soften the gaze – as if, for example, you were looking over the ocean or into the sky. All this should soften the forehead and temples. Bring attention to these points next, and if they feel tight, 'massage' them by repeatedly smoothing attention from the centre of each area to its periphery. You could widen and extend the sweep over the whole of the head and even down the body.

Tension around the eyes supports and conditions mental agitation, even if the eyes are closed. So start with keeping your eyes open (facing some quiet space) in order to support alertness, and to relax an agitated or tight gaze. This will help you to find the balance between over-relaxation (and drifting) and over-exertion (and intensity).

Widening and softening the focus will calm down mental activity; narrowing or sharpening will heighten discernment. The ideal is a balance, but a mind that receives the effects of a high-impact lifestyle will probably benefit from softening and widening its span of attention. Relax a little; be more spacious!

The 'sweeping' technique can be used over the whole body to counteract numbness or inadequate receptivity. Draw attention from any place in the body near to the numb place, where sensation is clearly perceived. Reach into the numbness and acknowledge any sensations, energies or moods that may arise. Don't try to obtain a particular sensation – instead allow awareness to uncover more subtly felt sensations. As you settle into feeling balanced in your body, centre your attention on the rhythmic sensations of in- and out-breathing.

Practise like this for half an hour and when it's time to conclude, do so carefully. First draw your attention back to the spinal axis, feeling that

unbroken line from the seat up through the crown of the head. Then widen your attention to include the whole mass of the body; resting on awareness of the skin and the tingling edge of the body with the acknowledgement that at that edge at this time everything is spacious and non-intrusive. Appreciate the sense of the space around you, and open into that by listening to what is around you, without engaging with it or thinking about it.

Finally, after a couple of minutes, let your eyelids open and spend a few moments allowing light and visual form to enter your awareness without engaging with them.



## **Difficulties**

### **Physical Pain**

The first obvious difficulty may be physical discomfort and pain. Bring mindfulness and clear comprehension onto the painful part and check any reactions. Is there a tension there or an imbalance that can be adjusted? Can another part of the body be adjusted to relieve that? Sometimes it's a matter of bringing another part of the body into balance: for example brightening the chest and relaxing the shoulders can take pressure off the lower back. Widen the body against the tendency to tighten up. Try moving slightly and slowly to detect where the unpleasant sensation finds an opening for relief. Use the spine as a reference: lengthen and flex it slightly, keeping the rest of the body relaxed. Things may move into a new balance.

Pain felt in the region of the knees is most likely to be a transference of inflexibility in the hips and upper thighs. The long-term remedy is to do stretching exercises around the hip joints. The short-term is to adjust the posture, or prop a cushion under a sore knee. If their pain is not too intense, the tissues in the hips and thighs may stretch of their own accord in time. The pass-mark for bearing with pain is that it should not cause

tension to spread through the body, nor lead to rigidity of attitude. Avoid bearing pain in the knees: the knee joint is a comparatively weak structure and meditators can damage their knees by 'sitting through the pain.' Although the mind maybe able to take this kind of treatment, the knee can't. The ligaments get torn and do not repair easily.

You may need to spend some time practising complementary bodywork. This would include exercises to stretch the limbs and strengthen posture. Many people find that a few postures of hatha yoga are an asset to meditation.

Discomfort that is not damaging to the body can be worked with in a contemplative manner, using the exercise of 'massaging' as mentioned above. If it is a manageable discomfort, contemplate the mental attitude and emotional response to the pain, and 'massage' those. For instance, we can adopt an aggressive impatient approach, or go into a self-pitying moan. Can we acknowledge and undo those energies? On the other hand, we may challenge the discomfort with heroic bravura, or the moral imperative to 'not give in.' But we can go deeper than these rather clichéd attitudes, to arrive at a more serene and responsive awareness of this inevitable aspect of sensory existence. Eventually we can focus on that awareness itself, and the pain may either fade from attention, or become a background.

This is not a matter of getting rid of pain, but of awakening an awareness that does not tighten into aversion. The encouragement is to 'feel the feeling in the feeling' – that is to be aware of the phenomenon as a thing in its own right without adding to or covering it. Pain will always find us in the end; we are well-advised to learn from it how to go deeper than our customary reactions and responses.

### Agitation, Obsession and Drowsiness

Another normal difficulty is the mind's inability to settle into the body, even when there is no particular physical discomfort. The common

experiences are of either restless thinking over a wide range, obsessive preoccupation in terms of hankering or irritation, or drowsiness. Sometimes the mind oscillates between all three. One of the prime reasons for this may be an energy imbalance: that is, shifting from work or being busy into sitting still causes the mind to stall. The meditation theme may be too subtle for the mind in its current state to get any traction.

- Open the eyes and attend to the sensations around the eyeballs.
- Sweep attention around the head as if you are loosening a headscarf. Do this clearly, gently and repeatedly.
- Push your tail into the seat or the floor and slightly stretch the spine upwards from the waist. Giving thorough attention to the posture, when you have slowly come to a full stretch, relax and loosen.
- Practise stretching and loosening for several minutes.
- In a similar fashion, contract and open your hands and soles of the feet.
- Control the breathing for a few minutes. That is, take a slow out-breath and when there is no breath in the body; hold that for around 15-20 seconds (or, the time that it takes for a discernible but manageable pressure to build up in the abdomen). Then draw the breath slowly and steadily in through the nostrils. Allow a few normal breaths and then repeat the exercise, say ten times.
- Practise standing for a few minutes.

Instructions for dealing with intrusive thoughts are to be found later in this part of the book, under **Process: Thinking, Emotion and Non-thinking**. More instructions on dealing with hindrances such as ill will, sense-desire, dullness, restlessness and doubt can be found under **Process: The Hindrances**.



## **If this form doesn't help you...**

If at times this all sounds like too much...just spending fifteen minutes or so sitting in a quiet place taking in the silence and letting one's thoughts and moods flow through may be a good place to start. Just get used to being present with yourself in a friendly and ordinary way. So use the opening meditation as a basic starter. There may be times when you'll want to develop the practice further with more detailed attention to posture; and it's also the case that posture will tend to develop by itself over a period of months and years if you cultivate a friendly interest in being present with yourself.



## **Further**

### **Breathing**

This practice leads naturally into mindfulness of breathing, which is discussed more fully later.

### **Aligning Energy**

Through correctly aligning the spine and bringing mindful awareness to the entire body, you can release the various blockages in the head, shoulders and abdomen. This is through tuning it to energy currents in the body. The body is energetic – that is you can sense pressures and flushes and warmth moving around the body when you sit still. Try to widen your focus to include all of them, and keeping a sense of openness, let them adjust themselves. When you meditate for a while in this way you may even begin to feel a subtle flow within the structural alignment; a current of subtle energy that flows from the tail of the body to the crown of the head. As your structure finds its balance, try to attune to these points at either end of the spinal axis. This energy will inform the posture in a self-supportive way. Rather than you having to hold the body up, the body's correctly aligned structures and energy balance will nourish and maintain the posture.

There is also a current that helps to drain tension and hyperactivity in the head. This flow moves down from the temples, forehead and eyes, down through the neck and throat and the centre of the chest, dropping past the navel into a point a palm's width above the pubis (the place in the lower abdomen where the muscular activity associated with a full exhalation comes to a standstill) to diffuse through the base of the body. It may be easier at first to use the relaxed state of the arms as a pathway for this current, sweeping awareness down from the head through the arms and into the palms.

The overall energetic sense carries a range of currents and sensations (which are quite chaotic at first), but rather than resist sensations or try to find a specific one, keep referring to that sense along these channels. Let energy move around and settle. Settling can be helped by tuning in to the energy that accompanies breathing. This will compose and brighten the affective bodily sense, and in accordance with that, the mind and its attention will settle.

Apply your intelligence to investigating the experience of the body, of how changeable it is. Acknowledge and try to distinguish different levels of the experience: the sensations (contact impressions), the feelings (pleasurable, neutral, and painful) and the perceptions (the interpretations of the sensations) which build up the impression of an 'inner body.'

To feel fully settled requires an awareness of both this inner core and of a space around the body that we feel settled in. So, when you have an overall sense of the body, try to discern the inner 'core' of the body, as distinct from the more peripheral and surface aspects of it. The core can be a place of great calm, but it also registers the tension, numbness or aliveness of the whole bodily system. To work on easing and brightening here will have deep significance for one's general state of being.

However, the periphery is also important, as it is here where we carry the effects of shielding ourselves from the outside world. And if this bodily

sense is contracted, it's likely that the attention will get drawn into intense or dull states. So practise drawing your awareness slowly in and out from the core to the periphery, from the abdomen and centre of the chest out to the space immediately around you. You can also use the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet as gateways for breath-energy. Attuning to the breath-rhythm in this fully embodied way regulates the energy and enriches the effect of the breathing. This has an overall balancing and healing effect.

## Standing Meditation

In this practice we work towards establishing a line of awareness and energy that can run from the soles of the feet up through the legs and spinal axis and crown of the head. Bad postural habits – such as leaning and slouching – cut this line, so that the body feels segmented. With poor posture the upper body leans on top of the lower body and the head occupies a very different realm from the rest of the body – for much of the time it may feel divorced from the torso. The average person may live a lot of the time in her/his head, which is impacted by the powerful input of sensory phenomena and turbo-charged thought processes. So the tension and strain that the head is under can feel normal. And since this part of the body and the functions associated with it are so central, as we get used to stress it even becomes part of who we are.

The aim of standing meditation is to change all that and get reconnected; to link everything up so that we arrive at a sense of wholeness and balance. The skill of the practice is in standing upright and balanced but not rigid. The effect is of being almost weightless, yet grounded. In this state, with the eyes open, one still feels less impacted by sensory phenomena, the mind is quieter, and one feels more fully ‘here.’

Stand with the legs slightly apart and coming straight down from your hips, and have your feet pointing straight ahead, approximately parallel. Unlock your knees so there is springiness there; let them be slightly bent. Focus on the soles of your feet. Spread your feet over the ground so that as much as possible of the soles of your feet are making contact with the ground. Your feet and toes should feel that they can sink into the ground so that you are like a tree or a plant growing out of the earth, rather than



some-thing perched on top of it. Get that idea in your mind and let your body follow that idea: it's as if your feet are sprouting roots.

With the knees unlocked, the weight of your body will be carried by your feet. Any locking in the knees will cause them to take some of the weight, and cut the flow of energy between your feet and the upper body. So remember to let the knees be loose – then the soles of your feet will be clearly and evenly sensed.

Another place that tends to lock is around the hips, the buttocks and sacrum, because of the habit of leaning. When we lean on a table or a wall, for example, generally the upper part of the body rests on the hips, buttocks and one elbow – which is propped on the surface that it is leaning on. Everything below the waist just hangs, maybe half-supported on one leg. The sacrum and lumbar region are twisted out of true and yet have to take the weight of the upper body, so they have to lock up to provide a rigid base. If this way of standing becomes habitual, the lock becomes chronic, and we lose the ability to stand on our own two feet.

In standing meditation, try to relax everything around the hips, the pelvic region, the buttocks and the sacrum. The way to bring this about is to 'drop' your spine. Imagine your spine extends so that you have a tail that is tucked down between your legs. With this posture, the tailbone is tucked in instead of being slightly arched back and locking the sacrum from below. The sacrum then rests down, and the joint between the last lumbar vertebra and the sacrum opens. In this position the buttocks are relaxed, so the weight descends through the legs.

You may find that when you do that, there's a shift of gravity forward into the lower abdomen. You will feel slightly stronger there. Relax the abdomen so it is not being held. And yet there needs to be a firmness there – not a tightness but a firmness. Relaxing in the perineum also relieves tension in the lower abdomen. The bony mass of the pelvic girdle then acts like a cradle for the soft tissues, and any abdominal tension can release.

Also, unlock the shoulders. It can be helpful to swivel your shoulders around, to swing your arms a bit by means of a gentle movement from the lower abdomen rather than from your head and your shoulders. Swing a little from side to side until the shoulders feel loose. There is no effort in the upper body and the relaxation of the chest and shoulders lets the arms hang free, slightly away from the sides of the body. Without moving anything, let the back relax downwards – as if you were slipping a cloak from your shoulders.

Let the neck be upright and the head free, as in the sitting exercise. Relax the jaw and let the tongue be at rest. Stand with your eyes in an open, distant gaze. Let the focus be soft. Be aware of standing, supported by the ground and open to the sky above. There is nothing pressing on your back; the forward direction is free and clear. The space around you supports you.

As the body comes into wholeness, attune to the breathing in the abdomen; let its even rhythm check any tendency to tighten up.

This posture feels unusual at first. The thighs have to get used to carrying weight and they will tend to try to lock the knees and send the weight into the pelvis by tightening the buttocks. This tendency can be counteracted by keeping these areas soft and aligning the knees over the centre of each foot. This widens the arch of the legs, sending the weight down the stronger outer edges of the thighs. The shoulders will tend to tighten up to lift the weight; even the neck and jaw want to contribute. Carrying the body through the legs may feel uncomfortable at first, but the wholeness of the body impression and the release of subtle tension make it well worthwhile. Keep focusing on the breathing. In time the legs will strengthen.

Going back to the soles of the feet, those zones of sensation, contemplate the pressure there. Where are the strong points? Where do you feel the most pressure? Is it towards the front, the sides, or the back? Is the body tending to balance more towards the toes, or the heels? Let yourself sway

a little until you can feel that pressure zone shift around in your feet. It's probably on one side of your foot. As you contemplate the shifting of the pressure zone, try to make the pressure zone the centre of each foot, immediately around the under-arch of the feet. Focus on the sensations in that under-arch. You will become able to discern a stirring of energy in those under-arches. When you can, acknowledge that point, and get familiar with it. In the course of the practice, those two points become an important focus: when the body stands aligned and balanced directly above those points, the posture will feel effortless and regenerative.

Gradually bring your attention from those points up through the lower legs and the upper legs, and into the central pelvic/abdominal region. Breathe steadily, into the lower abdomen; as you do so, you may sense a tingle flush through the upper body. Extend your awareness of breathing to include all that. Let the breath in, drawing that subtle energy up the upper body. Breathe out relaxing down through the upper body, down to the abdomen, down through the legs, and down into the floor.

Alternatively breathe out into the space around you and let your body open into that space.

Breathe in drawing awareness up through the feet, the legs, and the abdomen. Breathe out in the reverse direction. Thus, we have the rhythmic flow of the breathing and the direction of awareness following the same pathway. As they combine you may sense their energies merging. This is the subtle breath, which I'll refer to as 'the breath-energy.'

If you don't sense this, continue standing anyway, focusing on keeping the body from locking up. Stand for ten minutes or so at first, increasing the time in accordance with your capacities. Agitation and tension will tend to come in waves and bring up corresponding emotions. Use the breath to back up the practice. Every time you breathe through a wave of agitation, the body becomes more whole and energised, and awareness gains a deeper gravity. Empty the struggle into the body. Empty the body into the space. Eventually you can stand with the strength and flexibility of a tree.

## Difficulties

Here drowsiness is not going to be a problem, and it's unlikely that the mind will wander far – these are some of the advantages of standing meditation. Instead, the hindrance that is magnified is agitation and its corresponding tension, which mount quite an assault on the standing posture. But the above exercise is a physical means of releasing these. So allocate a time and stick to it, flexing your knees slightly now and then if you need to.

If you feel strained, resume sitting meditation, or move into walking.



## If this form doesn't help you...

Try flexing your knees slowly so that in ten seconds you move up and down about five centimetres. Springing in your knees a little helps to stop the muscles locking. You might also try rotating slowly from the hips in a side-to-side movement in which your abdomen describes an arc through the space in front of it. This movement also turns the shoulder blades in an arc through the space behind them. Moving while staying connected to the space above, behind, in front and below relaxes things and unwinds the attention without a loss of composure. In this way a firm but rested balance can develop.



## Further

As you come to the end of this period draw your attention toward the central part of the body, the lower abdomen. That is where you feel the breath beginning and ending. That is the collecting point for energy. Centre yourself there. Sense the space around you from this centre. Sense what it would be like if this area, rather than the head, were the governor of the entire body.

Bring up the intention to sit down. Don't act upon it. Just bring it up into the mind. Relax that thought and notice if your energy has shifted at all. Did you stay in that centre? Or have you gone up to your shoulders?

Bring up that idea again and notice what happens to the pattern of your energy.

Consider sitting down. This time, when you consider sitting down, hold the centre of your energy in your abdomen. Not by tightening anything but by keeping awareness centred there and relaxing any reaching up or contracting in the upper body, shoulders, and head.

When you feel ready, try to stay there and, relaxing the body, take up the sitting position.

## Walking Meditation

Walking meditation helps to refresh the body energy and encourage one's awareness to be wide and flexible. If this is developed, one ongoing result is that one knows how to be still and collected when the body is moving around in peopled space.

Although many people may not have access to the kind of secluded level track that is recommended for walking meditation, it is still advisable to cultivate this as best one can in a room, say by circumambulating it in a wide circle. A welcome alternative is a quiet place in a wood, park or beach. Otherwise, by considering the instructions carefully, you may be able to bring aspects of the attitude and the focus when you are just quietly strolling, or even moving along a busy street. As walking is one of the things that a body does, why not use it to develop the skills of awareness?

The skill of this practice is to stay centred while the body is both moving, and aware of its immediate environment. The recommended setup is a straight path of 20-30 paces in a secluded place, along which one paces mindfully to and fro. When you reach the other end of the path, you stand still for a few moments, turn around and repeat the exercise. Walk at a pace that feels conducive: calm, composed, at ease or vigorous. As your mind settles in, you'll get a more accurate feel for what is a suitable pace.

Begin by composing your attention while standing at one end of your chosen path. Bring yourself into the present moment with standing for half a minute or so. Stand in such a way that you can very clearly feel the soles of your feet spread over the ground and feel rooted to that particular

point. Stand and breathe in and breathe out with an awareness centred in the abdomen as it moves with the breathing. Bring up the intention to walk and notice where the attention moves to in the body, and any accompanying attitude or mind-state. Your centre may move up into the head and shoulders; so draw awareness back to the abdomen and relax the upper body. Do this a few times. The mind-states may express eagerness to get going, or just the opposite; we may be programming the future half an hour before we've really started. If we involve ourselves with that mind-state, it will lead on to distracting thoughts. So let go of that. Stay present being mindful of the body; in other words, sustain awareness of the senses and sensations that tell you that you have a body.

Let the body govern the posture as you move. Attune to what the walking mindfully entails. That is: the weight shifts to one side, until it is balanced above one foot, say the left foot; this allows the right leg to swing freely, which it does dependent on the pelvis arcing a few degrees to the left. The 'forward' step is powered both by that pelvic swing and by pressing downwards through the left leg. The length of the stride is determined by the extent of the swing and the downwards pressure: the kind of stride we use in meditation generally places the moving foot somewhere between a half and a complete foot's length in front of the stable foot. The sensations in the lead foot punctuate the movement as the pressure flows from heel to toe and is then released. Let it be released, keeping the ankle light and flexible. Keeping the mobile leg light and relaxed helps to prevent a strutting or tense walking rhythm. Walk naturally.

What also occurs in walking is that the upper body – the chest and shoulders – tends to swing back a fraction with each forward swing. As the left leg moves forward, the left shoulder moves back a little as a counterbalance. The flexing between the hips and the upper body creates a gentle massage for the abdomen, which supports ease and centring. This centring in the pelvic/abdominal region helps your attention to stay centred. If you maintain awareness of the dynamics and the rhythm of walking, a pleasant basis for mindfulness gets established through the 'pressure' and 'release' aspects of how the legs operate and the flexing of the torso. An easeful rhythm gets going that attracts the mind.

When you walk, you can gather your arms behind you, so that the arms feel long and relaxed, with the backs of the wrists resting on the buttocks and the fingertips of one hand folded over the edge of the other hand. This posture will keep the shoulders open and remind them to let any tension, any holding, drain down the arms. If your shoulders feel tense, you could also let your arms hang freely beside your body, so that their gentle swinging loosens the shoulders.

Walk at a moderate and composed pace. Keep the directives simple: walk to and fro and keep in touch with, or return to, bodily sensation. The mind's tendency may be to either go into thinking, or to get involved with what you can see. In either case, keep returning to the sensations of the body as you walk up and down. The mind will generally elbow in with comments about related and unrelated topics, so come out of that by sustaining the consideration: 'How do I know I'm walking?' You don't need an answer – it's just a way of getting the mind to return to the body and the present. You can support this more thoroughly by asking how your chest is, or how your shoulders are, attuning to how they are affected by walking. That will feel quite different from how they are affected by thinking.

The eyes readily mirror and affect the mind-state, so it's important to keep the gaze focused but light, letting one's eyes rest on a point in space slightly downwards, an arm's length to the fore. If you need a more discernible object, you can focus on the path itself, about three metres ahead of you, but keep the focus soft as if one were gazing out over the sea. Notice how the eyes feel if a particular visual object is grabbing your attention, or if a train of thought takes over or an attitude intensifies. Attention and energy run out when the eyes keep looking at this and that. On the other hand, a hard stare can bring around an excessively wilful state with a loss of receptivity. So attune your attention to the tactile experience of the eyes, of these physical organs being receptive but at rest. Feel the sensations in the tissues around the eyes, and relax there. Then your gaze gets soft, but your attention is attuned. When it does that, your mind relaxes without drifting, and you can refer to the eyes as part of the field of physical sensation.



Recognize the repetitive pattern of sensations that go with walking: sensations in the feet, the hips and the back. Settle into that. In this way, the steady rhythm of the walking acts as a reference that you can keep returning to in order to come out of compulsive thinking. Remember that you can stop and collect yourself in the standing position at any time that you seem to be losing touch with the feel and ease of the exercise. If you are becoming agitated or distracted, stop, stand still and breathe a few deep breaths. Then begin again.

Walking mindfully slows the mind's rhythm: eventually attention will settle into the physical sensations and the mind becomes calmer. As you start to get comfortable, bring ease to the entire body by opening your awareness to receive what bodily sensations come in. Let the energy of the walking flow over and through them. The full establishment of steadiness is when each part of your body 'knows' and is in touch with walking. When your mind settles in that, it won't be thinking or running out. Then, as you attune to how the body feels most comfortable and happy in walking, you will feel a regenerative energy that makes the practice tireless. This is one immediate benefit of walking meditation.

Finally, as you sense the still centredness of that energy – it's not a 'doing', 'achieving' kind of energy – you can bring the mind to greater stillness by centring on that. This stillness within movement is both a source for peace and also a valuable reference to counteract any random and agitating effects in one's immediate environment.



## **Difficulties**

The difficulties are likely to be the general agitation that occurs when the mind's preoccupations and wanderings are checked. The resultant agitation will manifest as a restless inability to settle in the body, and an attitude of boredom that keeps questioning the purpose and value of walking meditation. Another difficulty is the tendency to go into

automatic. One can be standing at one end of the path with eyes pointing at the path ahead, and then go stomping towards the end of the path without much awareness of the here-and-now flow of sensations. Things get robotic and the meditation becomes grim.

In either of these cases, pause and stand still for a few moments, breathing and attuning to the whole body again before resuming the walking.

Other points to watch out for are: take care that the shoulders don't hunch or the head bend over. These deviations out of true will create physical tension in the neck and shoulders and bring up tense mental states.

At times, it may well be the case that the level of occupation with thoughts and moods is such that you can't stay with the bodily impressions for very long. In that case, please look into the chapter **Process: Thinking, Emotion and Non-thinking**. We will also look at other ways of working with the mind in the next main part of the book.



### **If this form isn't helpful for you... or as an occasional alternative...**

Develop aimless wandering; take a walk through a quiet setting, staying in the present moment and acknowledging each sense-impression – the air on your face, the warmth of the sun, the sight of a tree, the sound of a bird, etc. – as it occurs. Let these impressions come and go.

Also allow the inner voices and movement of moods to unfold and pass as if they were part of the landscape. Give up on destinations or even on particularly interesting or beautiful things to see. Instead, slow down to be receptive to what each moment brings, in terms of any of the senses or the mind. Don't hold on to any of it: let the next moment happen by itself.

Beginning with the moment when you decide to walk, feel which parts of the body come alive with that thought – then relax the thought. Do this a couple of times, and then follow the directive to walk. Evaluate how the body feels now, in itself and in relationship to the space immediately around you. Bring up the possibility of walking, and of just following the direction that feels good. Noticing the bodily and emotional effects, follow that direction with a couple of slow steps, staying in touch with any interest or apprehension that arises from any of the sense-bases.

Maybe it feels too warm or cool, and so move towards where it feels better; maybe some small detail of what is around you seems to attract your attention. It could be a picture, a cup on a table, or the grain of wood on the door. Recognize that, relax any intensity around that, and move towards what attracts attention, a step at a time, reflectively. If you feel like standing still for a while, do that. Avoid locking into any of the directives, or locking them out. Avoid any written material, TV, radio, etc. Avoid contacting another person. Remember to attune to all the senses, but stay connected to the bodily presence as you move or stand.



## **Further**

Cultivate awareness of the space through which the body moves. In general terms, mindfulness of the body should allow the body to be natural – and this entails awareness of the immediate space around the body. The rest state of body-consciousness is about maintaining balance and receptivity to what the immediate space contains. We lose this when there are too many confusing or threatening experiences in the environment around us: we tend to seal off and dwell in our heads. This experience of disembodiment makes the body clumsy, unbalanced and unsettled. To feel balanced requires sensing a restful space immediately around us.

Awareness of space is not of a particular thing, nor is it merely visual; in the tactile sense it is experienced as an open awareness that we might associate with feeling 'at home.' Walking meditation can help you feel at home wherever you are. So walk towards the space that's in front of you, rather than any particular object. As you move, the space moves with you. It's always there, surrounding you. And then, at a certain point in time you get to the end of your path. You register that, stand, turn around, and come back. (For more on this, see **Walking through Space** in Part Three, **Releasing the Body**)

You can also refine the particulars of the walking, focusing on one part as you move. The sensations in the feet can easily become a more refined focus for the walking, but first cultivate the right way of receiving sensations, balancing attention and staying embodied. Then if you wish to investigate more closely, attend to the rhythmic change of pressures of the feet. You can link each footstep to breathing, for example: take three paces on the in-breath, then three paces on the out-breath. Or slow it right down with: as you breathe in, raise the foot and as you breathe out, place it on the ground. This pace makes even the span of a moderate room quite adequate for meditation.

## Reclining Meditation

It's helpful to know how to cultivate mindfulness while lying down, so that one goes to sleep in a calm and centred way or can sustain the practice when, owing to physical limitations, it's not conducive to sit up in one position for long periods of time. In the following postures, the deliberate composure of the body counteracts sleepiness or loss of focus, whilst also helping to bring around some relaxation.

There are a couple of reclining postures. The 'lion posture' is one of lying on the right side on a firm surface with the body stretched out straight and one arm resting along its flank, hand open just below the hip joint. The other arm is folded so that the palm of the hand supports the side of the cheek and the jaw, the fingertips touch the temples and the thumb connects to the base of the skull behind the ear. The ear is between the fingers and the thumb. The head is supported by means of a cushion, which should be no thicker than that which will fit in the gap between the head/neck and the floor, without twisting the neck.

Our tendency when lying down is to curl towards a foetal position, which turns down the energy in order to prepare for sleep. So, to counteract dreaminess and loss of focus, the alignment of the body should be straight, and the arm, hand and neck positions carefully maintained. Place the inner edge of one foot directly on top of the corresponding edge of the other foot, so that the joints of the big toes meet. Let one knee rest on top of the other. Positioning the body in this way establishes a line for awareness, and the energy can be maintained at a wakeful level. The energy-points in the under-arch of each foot, and the palms of each hand,

act as particular reference points, with one hand being ideally placed to transmit support and warm contact into the head.

Otherwise, and especially if there is tension and pain in the back, it is possible to mix relaxation with wakefulness by lying on the back with the soles of the feet flat on the floor and the legs forming an arch. Try to consciously give the body into the floor: attune to the varying pressures of different zones of the body distinguishing the bone from the flesh, and any places where the muscles feel tight from the softer tissues.

Does each shoulder blade fully rest on the floor? Gently wrap your arms around your chest and loop the fingertips behind the shoulder blades, then roll slowly from side to side, letting the movement open and relax the shoulders by means of a slight pull through the fingers as the shoulder leaves the floor. Get the buttocks to relax and spread by letting the arch of the legs swing from one side to the other. Ideally, the sacrum and the lumbar vertebrae will rest on the floor. These movements will help the back to relax.

Pull your chin towards the throat so that the neck lengthens and rests on the ground; then relax the chin without losing the neck alignment: this will help to rest the neck muscles.

Then let mindful awareness establish a line down the centre from the crown of the head to the sacrum. Sense the tail, and connect that sense to the sensations and energies in the soles of the feet, centring on the under-arch. As you establish that line of reference, add a line across the shoulders; this enables you to monitor the plane of the upper back.

Place the hands together palms down, so that the fingertips connect to a point just below the navel and the thumbs touch a point just above it. This finger-thumb circle could otherwise rest around the sternum (breastbone). In this position the energy of the palms and the sensitivity of the fingers connect directly to the open front of the body – a calming, intimate touch. This calming will make it easy to feel the breathing as it

rhythmically swells and relaxes the abdomen or chest. Let the palms fall towards the spine with each exhalation and then come steadily swelling up with each slow inhalation.

You can also counteract the sleep habit by sweeping attention in systematic loops from the upper body down one leg, and back up the other leg into the upper body again.



## **Difficulties**

Falling asleep is the obvious one; getting lost in thought is the other. These can be counteracted by deliberately thinking of one part of your body at a time – beginning with a foot, for example – and sending all your attention there. After a minute or two, let go of that part, relax it completely, and move up to the next part.

Because it allows energy to settle, this practice can also help to resolve insomnia. If one remains awake, one does so in a calm and restful way. And when the system finds that balance, if it needs sleep, one will go to sleep.

## Mindfulness of Breathing: Body

Mindfulness of in- and out-breathing is the most detailed and progressive meditation instruction given by the Buddha, affirmed by him as being a practice that leads to full Awakening. In the sutta in which these teachings are recorded [M.118], the instructions are laid out in four groups (called ‘tetrads’). These tetrads comprise groups of progressive instructions with regard to mindfulness of breathing as it affects and moderates the bodily energies, mental (emotional and psychological) energies and mental awareness. The fourth tetrad has a different approach, as we will see in Part Three.

But to begin...If we’re going to place attention on the breathing, we’d better be clear what ‘breathing’ is as an experience. So how do we know we’re breathing? Breathing in and out can be sensed through the movement of the muscles and other soft tissues of the abdomen, as well as the widening and lifting of the chest. Breathing can also be sensed through the sensations that the inhalation and exhalation of air makes with the nostrils and throat. Then again, whether we’re focused on it or not, we soon get to know about breathing through the presence of, or limitations to, our available energy. If you focus on the experience of energy, it’s obvious that the inhalation is different from the exhalation: breathing in brightens and arouses bodily energy; breathing out softens and diffuses bodily energy. The body senses the difference.

How the body senses itself is called the ‘somatic’ sense. What the somatic sense senses is the presence of and changes in the ‘inner body’ of bodily energy. This energy is called ‘bodily activity’ (*kāya-sankhāra*). It’s also referred to as ‘bodily formation’ as it’s the subtle, dynamic form of the



inner body. The Buddha referred to this somatic energy as a key to the practice of mindfulness of breathing; its significance lies in the fact that this energy relates to both the body and the mind. That is, when we feel tense, there is an emotional/psychological feel to that, and a bodily, somatic, one. Whether we feel happy, or at ease, depressed or sleepy, that state has mental and somatic effects.

A meditator can use this relatedness to their advantage, because having access to the somatic effect allows the possibility of witnessing and steadying the mind through sensing the somatic effect and steadying it. This is very much the case with mindfulness of breathing, because the energy that accompanies breathing is the centre and moderator of somatic energy. Therefore, just as the breathing may become choked, stale or irregular with difficult mind-states, a steady and easeful breath-energy will steady and even release those mind-states. It is through moderating this somatic energy that mindfulness of breathing leads to states of well-being and composure.

It's also the case that the mindfulness that registers the somatic effect does so in a direct rather than conceptual way. It's as direct and natural as knowing whether you are standing upright or leaning over. So when one 'knows' the breathing in this way, the activity of thought can quieten down and cease altogether – yet still there is the knowing. This mindful knowing doesn't operate in the same way as our customary thought processes: it's not agitated, has no aims, opinions or judgements. Some people call it the 'silent witness.' Still, it gives feedback: we can notice when it disappears under a wave of dullness or agitation and reactivity; and we can sense it in terms of its somatic effect. That is, as the knowing gets established, the body's energies relax and become clearer. Distracted or abstract thinking on the other hand create tension and flurries in the body.

The instructions in the first tetrad are: that one should be mindful of breathing in and breathing out; that one should train to be mindful of breathing in and breathing out long; of breathing in and breathing out

short; of being sensitive to the entire body while breathing in and breathing out; and one should calm the bodily activity while breathing in and breathing out.

In this, the Buddha's instructions repeat over and over that one should discern in-breathing and out-breathing – which is a rhythmic process. Yet there is no record that he ever specified where in the body one should place one's attention (or that one should even focus on the breath). The instruction is to be aware of breathing in and breathing out. And as he regarded this repetitive process as more significant than a place in the anatomy, then our focus must be on the discernible rhythm that the breathing goes through. So as we settle into the practice, the first step is to develop the ability to stay with the unforced rhythm and then be calmed and steadied by that. Then, if we access and dwell in the consequent pleasant somatic effect, the mind is cleared of hindrances and brightens. Eventually, when through bringing to mind and evaluating, the mind settles into the body's breathing, two bright states (of rapture and ease) arise to form a steady, pleasant base for awareness. With further settling these will lead to the level of concentration, called first '**absorption**' (*jhāna*). (We'll look into that in Part Two.)



Give yourself time to set up, and then settle into, a sitting posture that you can sustain comfortably for half an hour or more. Sit with the idea that the tailbones can extend down into the ground and take root. Relax your shoulders and draw energy down your back by the simple process of repeatedly and steadily sweeping attention down your spine, through the pelvis and into the ground. As you are doing this, let the front of your body feel free and open; let each inhalation lift through your abdomen and chest. Don't pull your chest or force the breath. Instead lift gently through the spine, as if you are hanging upside down, lengthening your waist and letting your neck be long. Tuck in the spine between the lower edge of each shoulder blade as if it were connected to the breastbone.

How do you know you're breathing? Feel the fullness of the breathing when the upper body is open: how the diaphragm moves steadily, how the chest rises and falls with the breathing and how the overall effect is vitalising. This effect is due to the energy of unhindered breathing. Stay with that, in an appreciative way.

Focus on the steady flow of inhalations and exhalations, and let your attention move around, familiarising itself with how the body is affected by breathing. You may find it helpful to deliberately extend each out-breath and in-breath a little for five or six breaths, so that the sensations associated with the endings of the breath are made stronger, and the pause between the breaths is clearly discerned. Do this in a gradual and relaxed way. Relax into those pauses between the breaths, letting yourself enjoy the fullness of an unforced inhalation and the release of a slow and restful exhalation. Make the practice one of letting the system fully ventilate...give it time to clear out any staleness; let your out-breath drop down through the belly like a deep sigh; let your in-breath open your body into the space around you. This is 'breathing long.'

Let the breathing find its own rhythm and extension; it may be quite irregular at first. Notice how the breathing affects the mind and heart and, as moods and mental energies come up, how they affect the breathing. Cool the reactions and let things come out in the wash...let ideas and feelings be like wind-blown leaves. Don't follow them; let them go. Be spacious; make a practice of being spacious and returning to the rhythmic flow of breathing.

Incline to settling. You can help this by waiting for the breath. That is, at the end of the out-breath, just wait for the in-breath to begin of its own accord. This should take a few seconds. Similarly, wait at the end of each inhalation.

If the body begins breathing in (or out) without a pause, the system is not yet relaxed and settled. You may benefit from a more relaxed and trusting attitude; or from moving your attention around your body, checking in

with its steady structure and the open, non-intrusive space around you. Then work towards relaxing the chest completely, so that the muscles of the abdomen operate the breathing. You may need to deliberately and gently swell out your abdomen for an in-breath until the system gets used to abdominal breathing.

When you notice that your attention has drifted (or leapt) off, wait in the acknowledgement of that for a moment. Don't react; just give the mind a moment to fully note the feel of that drift or spin, and the feel of the clear acknowledgement. Then, as you feel clarity return, ask: 'Where is my breathing right now?' In this way you bring the breathing to mind. Wait for the next exhalation, and as it comes, breathe out the agitated or constricted energy of the hindrance. If you feel sleepy or low in energy, wait for the in-breath and meet that, letting go of the dullness. Then wait for the next inhalation and be with that.

The mind will get agitated from time to time, but make the practice one of relating to the busy or wandering mind with sympathy. Rather than control the mind, or follow or speculate over its moods, keep patiently returning to the breathing with: 'Where is the breathing right now?' Wait for it, meet it and relax with the out-breath. Let the breathing moderate the mind.

When things settle down into a more regular pattern, your attention may centre on a particular point in your body – the back of the nasal passages, the throat, chest or diaphragm for example. Rather than force the mind to one point, let it settle where it feels most comfortable; or if it seems to settle in an overall awareness of the upper body, let it do that. The breath is quieter, but not because it's restricted; it's just that when the body is ventilated and relaxed it tends to shorten.

As you get more settled, attend to what happens regularly with each breath. Increase the evaluation with a (silent) question: 'How is the breathing now?' First, notice the rhythmic sensations of the physical form – most obviously the swelling and subsiding in the abdomen and

diaphragm. Second, be aware of sensations associated with the air striking the respiratory tract in the nose or throat. Third, note the regular shift of energy through the alteration in your body's general tone – how it brightens and sharpens with each inhalation, then relaxes and diffuses with each exhalation. Let your mind feel the rhythm of all these; attune to the sense of 'being breathed.'

If you find yourself settling in this rhythm, attend to the play and interaction of all aspects of the breathing process. Notice and give attention to the overall effects on your mind – whether you feel clear or sleepy, present or distant, relaxed or nervous for example. Then notice and feel out the effects on the entire body, and how you sense your body. Most likely, your sense of your body will include physical sensations and also the tingles and flushes of its somatic energies. You may even discern gentle tingling effects in places that seem removed from the breathing process, such as the palms of the hands, the flesh around the eyes and the temples.

As you settle into relaxing the chest and centring in the abdomen, see how much breath your body needs. Sometimes, as a nervous habit, we 'overbreathe.' Try taking a little less breath on the inhalation, and slowing it down. Do so without force, but with the suggestion, 'Why don't I just relax a little more? How much do I really need right now?' Imagine the breath to be a like a fine strand of silk passing through the body, and keep relaxing into the calm. If the changes that you experience give rise to a sense of getting somewhere – relax that sense and just be with the breathing a moment at a time.

When the breathing does calm and become centred, its energy will feel bright and steady. (This may take several sessions, so be patient and let the system learn at its own rate.) The material aspects of the breathing – the sensation of the air and the movement of the diaphragm – will tend to fade out, leaving just a bright somatic energy. Let this breath-energy flow through and suffuse your entire bodily sense. Imagine the whole field of the inner body with its nerves like capillaries quietly flushing with

breath. Focus on the mixture of mental brightness and subtle bodily sensation, letting go of any wavering or flurries that may occur. Enjoy.

Notice how the experience of body has changed. How is it now?

When it's time to come out of the meditation, do so in a graduated and centred way. First of all connect to the physical aspects of breathing, the airflow and the subtle movements of the body. Then take some time to feel into the bony structures of the body, with the softer tissues wrapped around them. Connect to the ground by focusing on the upright spinal axis. Notice how the experience of body has changed.

After a minute or so, open up to the space you're sitting in by listening to the sounds and the silence around you, then as you feel ready, slowly opening your eyes and letting light and external form enter your awareness. Even now, don't jump out into seeing – rather, let forms introduce themselves to your awareness until you feel ready to meet and address them.



## **Difficulties**

If you find it difficult to stay with feeling your body, try using various forms of thought to give you a bodily focus. For example, silently intone a number, in sequence from one to ten at the ending of each exhalation; and then do the same in reverse, returning to one again. If you forget which number you're on, return to one and continue as before. Another method is to silently intone the word 'Buddho:' 'Bud-' on each in-breath and '-dho' on each out-breath. This may work even better if your eyes are slightly open.

You can also try imagining what the breath feels like. What would it look like? This may help to open up a more attuned receptivity in the mind.

In any prolonged period of meditation there is often the difficulty of discomfort and pain. The advice is a simple rule of thumb: with what is bearable and manageable, keep massaging around and through the sensation with awareness, as outlined before. The possibility that this breath-meditation offers is to relax the somatic energy so that it doesn't contract around unpleasant feeling. It is this somatic contraction, as if the body is trying to pull away from the unpleasant sensation, that triggers emotional and psychological suffering. If there is no contraction, there is unpleasant feeling, but no suffering.

As the practice develops (over months or years), a lot of physical discomfort will be eradicated by suffusing the body with rapture and ease.

Some discomfort is caused by trying too hard. Tension arises if we support the idea, even unconsciously, of getting somewhere or attaining some state. The mind also gets tense if we have approached the breathing with an attitude of 'concentrating on the breath.' This may sound counterintuitive: surely we're supposed to be concentrating on the breath. But the Buddha's approach is one of sensing and knowing the breathing. As we do that, and get comfortable with that, the mind settles down. Then, as it gets really settled and happy (which does take time), it comes to one-pointedness in that comfort. This is what's meant by 'concentration' (*samādhi*). It's a result, a state, rather than an activity.

The emphasis therefore has to be on regulating the energy by tuning in to the whole breath, especially including the pauses: it's in these that dissonant energies intrude. Then you keep connecting the mind to the breathing by bringing the breathing to mind and evaluating it. Remember: one aspect of the one-pointedness is that of attitude – to just be with the breathing, sampling it and sensing it in a reflective way.

Unsteadiness of energy can be remedied by adjusting the breath-energy. This is particularly for cases where the energy drops too radically with the out-breath (and causes a drop in attention) or rises too vigorously with the in-breath (and causes over-intensity). You can lengthen the

pauses as described above. Also, there is a more subtle way. If you contemplate the energy that accompanies the respiration, you'll notice that it normally descends on the out-breath, and ascends on the in-breath. The imbalances can be remedied by reversing the energy pattern; you can do this by developing attention and perception in particular ways. That is, on breathing out, establish the perception of speaking out loud, or of chanting or singing. This sends energy upwards through the chest. With the in-breath, establish the perception of drinking the air in, right down through the pit of the stomach. If you can, imagine it descending through the body to the tailbones, with the body opening up as it takes in the air. As an added touch, try this while standing up.



### **If this form doesn't help you...**

Use the exercises on the four postures (sitting, standing, walking and reclining) to develop the mind. Breathing is always happening, but maybe there are other things that are more accessible to your mental state at this time. Also have a look at the instructions **Sublime States** and **Deep Attention and Investigation** for a change of focus.



### **Further**

In this exercise, changes in the mental landscape may become apparent. There may be an increasing degree of calm and composure, which is accompanied by stepping back from physical sensations and relaxing into the somatic energy. This brings around an inner brightness and pleasure, called '**rapture**' (*pīti*) and '**ease**' (*sukha*). With this inner brightening, the mind begins to feel like it is participating in, rather than merely observing, the process. It feels held in, or floating in the breath-energy, and there is a sense of buoyancy. Mental activity, especially thinking, quiets down. However, you may also feel some unsteadiness. The unsteadiness, like the uplift, has an emotive resonance; the uplift is joyful, the unsteadiness is a



mixture of excitement and nervousness. It may unsettle the attention and cause it move or drift away from the breath into associated imagery or moods.

Accordingly, notice and sustain the formed impression that the energy takes, a subtle body within the flesh and bones body. That is, the pattern of your breath-energy tracks and maps out lines and systems of subtle energy; so just as if you were looking at a picture of the skeletal or nervous system, study the 'picture' that the breath-energy forms. Give this attention rather than the emotion or mood. If things still feel too highly charged, widen your span of awareness and soften your focus; widen into the space around you. If the energy is coming in waves, attend to its relaxing aspect, rather than its heightening aspect.

It may be the case that a subtle impression, like light or warmth, appears in the mind. Steadily receiving this impression (rather than seizing it or glaring into it) also supports settling the energy. Eventually the mind will experience more ease than rapture.

In subsequent exercises, we'll look at how mindfulness of breathing can moderate mental/emotional energy.

## **Process: Thinking, Emotion and Non-Thinking**

*...with the abandoning of unwholesome thoughts, one's awareness becomes steadied internally, quietened, unified and concentrated. This monk is then called a master of the courses of thought. One will think whatever thought one wants to think and not think any thought one doesn't want to think...one has made an end of suffering and stress. [M.20.8]*

We suffer a lot through our thoughts, more commonly so in the West nowadays than through physical problems. And in meditation we start to recognize that any physical pains that we do have can be made much worse by the attitude with which we hold them. Much the same goes for pain from a mental, perceptual source. Thinking forms a significant part of the way physical pain is held; it is charged with emotional drives that give rise to that 'trapped, desperate, this shouldn't be happening' mood. Then there are the pleasant sensations or mental states accompanied by 'more of this, this is the way it should be' and the neutral accompanied by 'well, shouldn't something be happening?' Although these moods do the holding, they in turn are backed up and incited by the thinking process. 'I was feeling OK until I started thinking about the rotten deal I got, or what someone else is getting, or the way it was, or the way things ought to be...'

Even when thinking is conducive to pleasant moods, it contains the drawbacks of restlessness and loss of receptivity. If the mind is overstimulated it stirs up too much energy and also diminishes the appreciation of the here and now. Thinking too much, we go racing ahead of where we're at. With a head full of good ideas, we can get clumsy,

impatient and insensitive, and so preoccupied that we don't attend to the present moment or the person next to us. Perhaps even more fundamental than that is the loss of connection to our own bodily presence when thinking gets over-stimulated. This can lead to any of the many unnecessary accidents that beset our lives.

And yet thinking is an important part of our lives and cultivation. So the Buddha taught two levels of mind cultivation: the first is to replace unwholesome, pointless thinking with skilful thoughts and use the evaluation faculty to understand the effect of the thought. Subsequent to that one learns how to put all thinking aside in order to still and unify the mind. In the first case, we learn to take a moment at a time, acknowledge it with a very simple thought, and back that thought up with the more receptive evaluation faculty. For example: breathing in with the thought 'Bud-' and out with the thought '-dho.' Then evaluate: what is the feeling of this? What effect does it have? In the wider context, how we think affects how we speak (and the converse), so we learn to contemplate: 'How is my speaking affecting others? What attitudes is it highlighting in myself?' In all of this, the Buddha's instruction simply is to acknowledge and lay aside the unskilful, and pick up and sustain the skilful. The struggle to do just that is what the following exercises are intended to address.

The second level of mind-cultivation deals with stilling the action of bringing a topic or object to mind. The following exercises also suggest ways of capturing the energy of thought and gathering that into the still alertness of concentration, to the degree of absorption. With reference to this cultivation it's instructive to note that even skilful thinking occludes deeper receptivity and access to the territory which we might call 'the unconscious.' Thinking taxes the energy that is shared with the body. In the Buddha's teachings, mind, body and emotion are connected, and it is by gathering them together that we enter concentration.

The connection between thinking and emotion is perhaps more apparent; even academics get impassioned when talking about their pet theories,

and Buddhist meditators certainly get fired up about their insights. If the emotion is wholesome and is encompassed by awareness, fine; it's when the emotion is denied that problems arise, even around wholesome or neutral thoughts. We deny that such and such is 'just an opinion,' or that we have any partiality towards a particular view. However with the more powerful emotions, we've all noticed the bodily effects: the tightening and heat associated with anger, the stomach churning of worry and anxiety, the paralysing and numbing effect of shock and the brightening effects of love and joy. A keen attention can discern the somatic and emotive effects that accompany any thought. When we can discern and moderate these we can either think skilfully, or stop thinking.

In this we begin to handle the verbal activity/thought-energy (*vaci-sankhāra*) – which is such a powerful factor in our lives. Investigating its mental activity/emotive energy (*citta-sankhāra*) helps us to see through apparent 'objective rationality' to the undisclosed attitudes and biases that engender suffering. If we can master thought, it can be used for specific clarity and discernment, rather than second-hand generalizations.

Hence one of the aims of the meditation exercise below is to touch into the emotion underneath the thought, reveal and allay or balance the emotion. Emotions tend to convince us with a smokescreen of rationality, or capture us by their power. Also, even if we are keen to allay an unsupportive mood, we can't always change our mood by reasoning or aspiration; and in that stuck state we can add more emotional and conceptual material to the mix with a depressed or guilty mood. However, in meditation we develop the skill to relate to the somatic effects of an emotion, rather than add more emotions or thoughts to it. We're learning to 'know the mind in the mind,' rather than believe in it, dismiss it or get depressed about it. A calm and open bodily state is a great support for this. Whereas our emotional sense can add conviction and vitality to an angry or righteous stream of thought, it is impossible to maintain such thinking with a calm and relaxed bodily energy. Hence the great advantage of tackling the emotional state by referring to the somatic

state: the body is not convinced by justifications, and has no opinion about our emotional balance. It just knows, ‘this feels stressful, better to let go of that,’ ‘this is uplifting, it’s good to follow that.’ There is development in terms of **calm** (*samatha*) and **insight** (*vipassanā*).

Of course many emotional states are affirmative, and all that is needed is to find balance within them so that we can manifest them in a sustainable way. We may, for example, find ourselves unable to handle or express our affirmative moods; or, on the other hand, overwhelm or dominate others with a positive but insensitive energy. Then again, it’s easy to overlook more far-reaching or ethical issues through being charged up over one aspect of a competitive sport, performance or social gathering. Or, we develop an indiscriminating infatuation with a person, rather than a more rounded-out appreciation. However, if we can contemplate the emotional effect of thought – how inspiration or joy affects us – then there is the possibility of sustaining and steadying that effect. This leads to the skill – which is referred to in the next set of instructions on mindfulness of breathing – of steadying a positive affect to the degree where thinking can cease. Deep concentration and well-being can be realized through the stilling of all thought, and the abiding in uplifting states. And with that comes the recognition that happiness is an energy within us, rather than something that has to be catalysed by events and people around us. So we don’t have to need (or miss out on) good times. An accomplished meditator can use their appreciative and enjoyment faculties to support and bless others, or to abide pleasantly in the here and now.

The cultivation of perceptions, thoughts and emotions is a large part of all Buddhist meditation, and of life in general. In this we can always benefit from checking and penetrating the energy of thought, and below are a series of exercises, or tips, to help with this. These don’t form one exercise, but offer particular ways of getting a handle on the thinking that can occur while attending any meditation theme.



The initial approach is to just keep cutting off the stream of thought by acknowledging it and returning to the meditation theme. Determine to put the topic aside and consider the value of so doing. Contemplate the state that the mind is in when caught in even the most entertaining thought. Is this going anywhere? Is this a good use of this occasion?

After returning frequently to the theme in this way, and finding that the mind is not settling, contemplate the flow of thought, the topics that come up...is there one that seems to be most prominent? Some may be secondary, thinking about the thinking, or compensatory, thinking that takes one away from the primary concern, or arising due to the disturbed energy of the mind. Ask: what is of concern here?

Consider the thought in the following way:

- How does the topic of thought affect my life?
- What areas of concern does it touch into?
- What would it be like if this thought were not here?
- Can I determine and resolve to follow that line of thought? If not, why keep it going? If so, what stops me from acting on it?
- Considering all these, is there a particular action or process that I feel moved to undertake?

Then determine to follow that action, or process, one step at a time, in way that now seems appropriate.



If this doesn't serve to quieten and unify attention, listen to the thought-stream, ask it to repeat itself or provide more detail. Note the change in rhythm, tone of inner 'voice' and how certain images or phrases stick out in terms of intensity. Note also any pauses, drops or rises in levels of intensity. Bring up the intention to put the topic itself to one side for a while, and ask what the primary feeling is. There may be a few, so ask

which is the dominant one. Don't be in a hurry. Repeat this until you feel certain. Note how that mental perception and feeling affects the bodily sense: whether you lose your sense of body, or feel tight or hot or unsteady. Above all, whether the specific emotion is one that pushes out or one that sinks you down, notice the general 'stuck' mood that comes with an unresolved thought-process. Without losing reference to the specific mood, deal with the overall 'stuckness' that makes it seem so much what you are.

Ask what the overall 'stuckness' needs: space, firm ground, empathy, release...what would that feel like? Rather than trying to get rid of the mood, bring that sense of interested empathy to it. What aspects of practice evoke that sense? Is there need for kindness, or letting-go? Can you bring to mind a person you respect who embodies that? Bring those perceptions to the mood. Turn that theme over and over in the mind, contemplating the moods, perceptions and energies that come up. Back this up by reflecting on the 'stuck' perception that the distracting thought brings up, no matter how justifiable or interesting its topic. Note whatever accompanies the shift to letting go and incorporate that into your theme.

If there is a freeing up of the 'stuckness,' how does the original topic now seem? Can you allow it to settle by itself? If it's unresolved, is there room to live with it? What would allow that room? Consider: what immediate shift in awareness creates that space, and how does it feel? Or, if there's something – a need, a grudge, an attitude – preventing that shift, is there room to be with what prevents that shift? And what creates that space? Without dismissing the topic, review it from that space. Does this present a fresh insight into the attitude that underpins and holds the thinking process?

In responding to the stuckness with interested empathy rather than with a fixed attitude, we may suddenly realize a fresh approach to the topic of thought or the mood that it brings up. It may have been a matter of finding the right space, rather than holding it tightly.



If the thinking process continues to run on as before, or you couldn't bring the previous process into fruition, try going to the overall sense of the body and relax that, breathing in and out steadily. Don't concern yourself with changing the thought, but with settling the awareness to more fully receive the effects of the thought. Keep focusing on areas of the body that seem disturbed, held or contracted, relaxing them, opening them up to the thought and its perceptions and feeling. Transfer the thought-energy into the embodied awareness, mixing and mingling the two as you sit, stand or walk.

Attuning to the rhythm and energy of the thinking, ask if it's possible to slow it down a fraction in order to meet that energy more completely. Keep slowing it until the thoughts are at 'walking pace' and the spaces between them are discernible. (You could combine this with 'aimless wandering' as in **Walking Meditation**.) Whatever the form you use, contemplate the arising of each thought out of the space, and assist in the formation and moulding of each thought. Help it along, like supervising a toddler trying to walk. As each thought begins to subside, help it to its rest like helping an elderly person into their seat. Feel what it's like when the thought has rested. Be willing to help the next one to its feet.



In these ways we use the power of extending awareness over the thinking-consciousness so that its activity is gradually calmed. In the 'aimless wandering' we extend awareness through all the sense-bases, again while slowing down the activity of the mind so that the arising of attention and intention can be recognized and calmed. Breaking the rhythm of the thought-process in this way checks its emotional surge, without creating an emotional surge or thought-process to oppose it.

Another angle, with thoughts that one rather treasures and tends to indulge in, is to bring up some enquiry. Break into the stream with the question: 'Who is thinking?' The stream will break momentarily, and then



flow again, perhaps in response to your question. Ask the question again and again, to the main topic or any responses to the question itself, breaking the rhythm of the thought-flow until you can apply that question to the beginning of the thought. Contemplate that area where the thought emerges. What is the energy and perception there? Who or what is that?

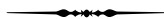


The final resort – perhaps to be used in an instance where one is about to act – is to suppress the thinking process with a bodily action, such as pressing the tongue against the roof of the mouth, holding the breath or clenching the fists. We might resort to such measures when we ‘bite our tongue’ to check an unskilful comment or a giggle.



## **Difficulties**

The primary difficulties arise from being entranced by the thinking, so that the wish that the thinking stop does not rally enough mindfulness, energy and know-how to bring that wish to fruition. To simply suppress the thinking or to deliberately think its opposite (replacing a thought of malice with one of loving-kindness, or of sexual desire with one of the unattractive aspects of the body) is a straightforward strategy, but the mind may soon lose interest and enthusiasm in carrying it out. The crucial point here is whether the spiritual faculties are strong enough to come out from the mesmerising effect of an obsessive thought. The heart responds to, and even hungers for, heightened effects, and the intensifying effect of a hindrance, especially sensedesire, has a magnetic pull that may be too strong for one’s limited stock of will power, mindfulness and faith. Worries seem to be urgent and responsible responses. Similarly, when one’s mind is obsessed by a grudge, the practice of kindness may come across as dismissing or glossing over a legitimate complaint.



## **If none of these forms help you...**

Try writing down the thoughts, on the condition that you will not preserve their written form. As the thought-process unfolds and you write it down choicelessly and without editing, stay in touch with the moods that flow through the mind. When you choose to end, consider why. Read what you have written with open-minded interest, as if it were written by somebody else. Who do you think wrote that? How does that person feel? Can you experience some kindness, compassion or interest in that person's well-being? Consider the stream of thoughts in that way. When you have finished, respectfully incinerate the paper.

You may also find it helpful to talk your concerns over with a skilled listener.



## **Further**

In any of these, contemplate the space that is there at the ending of a thought. What is the perception of that space – large, bright, cool, warm, attentive, silent? What is the mood of that space – serene, friendly, awesome, concerned? Let the sense of space or silence be the ground for mindfulness of whatever mood arises. Holding to that ground will allow the mood and thought to pass. Whose is the mood? Whose is the silence?

With the thought-stream as one reference, and the absence of thought as the other, and with an ability to at least step back from the proliferation of topics within mental awareness, we get in touch with more subliminal and residual emotions. These manifest as a familiar pattern of feeling that seems to be very much what 'I am.' This emotionally familiar zone, which is felt as 'my self,' is the focus for the ongoing liberation of the heart – which means not trapping that apparent self in any view or attitude. Allow it to be what it is and change as it will.

So keep a sustained awareness of that feeling, that sense of who you are, without trying to change it in any way or even understand it. Learn to maintain an empathic and steady presence and attune to any changes, shifts of feeling or energy that occur. Just allow the relationship between your watchfulness and your felt sense of self to mature. And of course, be on guard against any analysis!

## Process: Hindrances

*When one knows that these five hindrances are cleared, gladness arises...from gladness comes delight, from delight in the mind, the body is calm, with a calm body one feels joy, and with joy, the mind is concentrated.*  
[D. 2.75]

The ‘**hindrances**’ (*nīvarana*) are mental states that act as obstacles to concentration, clarity and deepening. These are generally listed under five headings: **sense-desire** (*kāmacchanda*) to which may be appended **covetousness** (*abhijjhā*); **ill will** (*vyāpāda*); **dullness** and **lethargy** (*thīnamiddha*); **restlessness** and **worry** (*uddhacca-kukkucca*); and **wavering** and **doubt** (*vicikiccha*).

The hindrances arise as topics – the mind picks up a thought or an image of something to long for or find fault with – and also as energies. That is, there may be agitation (too much energy, not enough centredness); or a stale energy, as in the case of ‘sloth-torpor.’ At times the energy may feel fixated, as when there is obsession and the mind is wrongly centred in ill will or craving. Sometimes hindrances arise in mixed forms such as boredom, a state that can be a mix of low levels of ill will, craving for sense contact and the lack of initiative that characterises the dull mind-state of lethargy.

In their mixed and diluted forms hindrances may not be apparent, and may hide behind either attitudes or views. An attitude such as ‘I’m not in the mood for this today’ may be a cover for ill will or sloth. A view such

as ‘I’m not the kind of person who needs to develop mindfulness’ may again be a mix of hindrances. The world in general bristles with views and attitudes that justify killing as well as other kinds of conduct that lead to conflict and suffering. And these views persist through human history. Therefore one of the founding principles of the Buddha-Dhamma is to investigate the mind; that is, to investigate both the causes and consequences of actions, and the present moment mind-state. This is the process of reflection and ‘**deep attention**’ (*yoniso manasikāra*). Furthermore, in meditation we are encouraged to investigate the ‘feel’ of any mind-state: is it agreeable, does it feel settled; is it the kind of state that you’d like to continue? Or is it rough, or blurred?

This is a good way to pick out the hindrances: they have a constrictive feel to them. They hinder the brightness, agility and ease of the mind. They create pressure or weigh down on awareness making it fixated or dull. When you investigate beneath the plausible rationale or the glittering attractiveness of a mind-state, you can touch into the feel of the energy of that state. Skilful states, such as compassion or patience, may not be promising you anything; they don’t have a lot of dazzle to them. But beneath the surface they feel strong, clear and bright. Righteousness, on the other hand, can be very convincing, but it feels fixated and harsh and closes the mind down. Sexual desire can have a compelling lustre to it, but, beneath the surface of its promises and fantasies, it feels hungry and driven. To investigate such phenomena in terms of causes and consequences and in terms of present-moment ‘feel’ leads to great insight. Looking into the underpinnings of what drives, repels and shuts us down shows us how much of this is just assumption and habit. And when we free ourselves from these, a whole new world of potential becomes available.

The hindrances are never dispelled by acting on them. So one of the aims of meditation is to clear them, even when they’re just latent tendencies that will flare up sooner or later. To clear them, you have to encounter them – so when you notice a hindrance, that isn’t a disaster, but on par for the course. Nevertheless, until you know how to encounter and clear

these hindrances, the mind will always be subject to their contractions, stress and biases. Understanding that makes the meditation keen and important; a sense of ardour (*ātapi*) gets aroused. This quality is a necessary concomitant to Buddhist meditation. It means being keen, alert and ‘on the ball.’ Moreover, the experience of how the mind’s awareness feels when it is unhindered (the Buddha likened it to coming out of jail, or recovering from a terrible sickness) ripens that ardour into a mature source of purpose and wisdom.

Even when these hindrances come up, just through tackling them they teach us detachment: they, like our more fortunate states, are events rather than personal possessions.

Below are offered some fronts from which to encounter and clear the hindrances.

### **Address attention and attitude**

A first step on encountering a hindrance is to check the attention: am I attending to a theme that is useful? To be addressing sources of conflict in one’s life is useful, but only in so far as it doesn’t bed the mind down in ill will towards oneself or others. Similarly, there’s a time when planning is advisable, but if it serves to overwhelm the mind in restlessness, then stronger mindfulness is necessary. So when there are ‘hot’ topics, topics that carry a lot of charge for us, we need to establish a basis in wise reflection. That is, one considers, in the case of conflict: ‘Conflict is a common part of human experience, not just a personal failing in myself or others. When it occurs, I need to consider what is most important to our well-being – to accept that people see things differently, and to aim to explore our views without creating hurt and harm.’ Or: ‘Uncertainty about the future is a natural state, because the future is the unknown. Rather than try to predict it, or worry about it, the wisest course may be to steady and uplift the mind in the present. Then whatever happens, I’ll be in the optimal state to handle it.’

Reflection like this is called ‘deep attention’ because while not ignoring the topic, it looks more deeply into causes and consequences around the dynamic within which the topic is held. There may be issues of who has power, of winning and losing self-esteem. We may be berating ourselves because we aren’t living up to the ideal that we’d like to be. We may be lacking in confidence in our capacities. These issues need to be acknowledged so that they don’t add another layer of concern to the topic at hand. However, in all of this, deep attention deals with one issue at a time, finding out which is the most important one first. Maybe it’s just that we don’t want to deal with conflict! Similarly with craving and ambition: find the time to ask what is really important to you. Could that be found in the present moment by developing a friendlier attitude towards yourself? Skilful enquiry, supported by mindfulness and the overriding attitudes of good-will, empathy and letting go, can bring around resolution both with others and within ourselves. (See **Deep Attention and Investigation** for further guidance on this topic.)

Sometimes, the wandering mind is just restless and simply needs checking. So as you recognize that it’s drifting, pause, ask: ‘Where is my breathing/body/meditation topic right now?’ and let the mind realign its awareness to the theme of meditation. With this, be careful not to add any judgements, impatience or agitation – these will only provide food for further hindrances.

In general, the basic attitude that works best in meditation is to let go of how things should be, and address how things appear to be. Addressing what arises through an attention based on good-will, empathy and letting go helps to lead the mind from a good position, and that in itself can ease the mind out of a hindrance. When we really find value in goodwill and letting go, then there’s much less room for hindrances to breed. Regard the mind as a treasure to be guarded, valued and polished: with this attitude one gets to live with the most reliable source of well-being.

## Address topics

Sometimes the mind isn't really interested in the meditation theme, and so it wanders off in all directions. The Buddha recommended that in the same way that a king's cook watches what food his/her master likes best and then serves him that food, so different themes, or techniques within a theme, work better for different people. The skill is to find what works for you in terms of bringing around an available base for mindfulness.

For example, you may find it better to focus on your spine when sitting, or on the rhythm of breathing, or on the overall sense of the body; or, you may find that directing goodwill towards your body helps; or a detailed visualisation of the parts of the body if you're getting swept away in sexual desire...and so on.

Another alternative is one of not having any topic! That is to sustain the overall attitude of goodwill, non-forcefulness and letting go, and let the mind wander. Then, wherever the mind's awareness goes, allow that; wherever it rests or lingers, be light with that and let it pass. Just keep loosening and releasing the mind's tendency to hold on to a thought or a sensation and make more of it.

When a hindrance has a very strong grip, however, it's not always easy to stay light and let go. Then one may directly address the topic in a way that counters it. This is called '*patikkūla*' – 'countering the affiliation.'

### • Sense-desire

In this respect, when the mind is obsessed with sexual desire, or fascination over one's own or another person's body, the recommended medicine is to bring to mind and consider the unattractive aspects of the body. First, that the body's nature is to age and degenerate, and it only looks really attractive through preparation, dressing up, grooming and styling. So one considers the wrinkling and various blemishes that affect the skin, the sagging of the shape of the body, or even what it looks like when one is ill.



Further, one can bring to mind what the body is like under the skin: fluids and membranes and organs that don't arouse sexual interest, and may even arouse disgust. Playing with the perception of the body in this way helps us to see that desire and fascination isn't really about the body; it's more the case that there's an energy and a view in the mind that projects itself onto the body and dresses it up as something that it really can't be.

In terms of inanimate objects, 'for covetousness' – that is, hankering after clothes, cars, furnishings, gadgets and so on – the standard countering reflection is to consider how attractive such things will appear in five or ten years' time, or to consider them as they deteriorate, break down or become old-fashioned.

- **Ill Will**

Ill will takes various forms, but the accompanying energy is one of contraction. There may be a sense of recoiling with disgust or aversion; or the opposite, a bristling with aggression; or, there may be a state of mind that is unresponsive, lacking in empathy or goodwill. Admittedly, it's not sensible to dwell in dangerous situations or be with untrustworthy people, but the withdrawal from those can be through the positive senses of clarity and discernment rather than with a negative attitude. Whenever one feels the absence of willingness to be here or to be with an experience, based on blind reflex, this is ill will.

It's surprising, but statistically true, that the greatest percentage of ill will that we experience is towards ourselves – or, more accurately, towards certain perceptions/impressions that we have about ourselves and our behaviour. This is why there is a continual emphasis on establishing an overriding attitude of goodwill and empathy towards oneself as well as towards others. Meditators in general include the practice of kindness/non-aversion (*mettā*) as a meditation theme. We'll look at this in depth later. However, in brief, the practice of kindness entails checking the blaming, cynical, mean-hearted or demanding attitude by diverting the flow of thought to something that causes comfort, respect, gratitude or affection to occur. This may mean acknowledging a good deed, or at

least a sincere endeavour of some kind. It may mean recalling an incident in which you felt loved, appreciated or valued. Connecting to that impression and the mood that accompanies it, you then mindfully bear that in mind to allow the mind to fully take in the feeling of non-aversion, non-contraction or goodwill. It's not a matter of painting everything in rainbow colours, but of acknowledging the damaging effects of ill will, arresting the flow of thoughts of ill will and turning the mind to an impression that encourages it to soften and widen into the health of goodwill.

Compassion (*karunā*) for other people when they are trapped in deluded or abusive behaviour is another way of turning the mind away from blaming and holding grudges. Behaviour is not a person! The way we act is according to inherited programs that we learn or get conditioned into. And although we can cause harm to others, unskilful behaviour is a disease that infects and afflicts our own hearts.

Furthermore, the practice of appreciative joy (*muditā*) of others' good fortune, success or talent combats jealousy and indifference. And finally there is equanimity (*upekkhā*). This is the ability to be present and spacious with any emotional state or personal characteristic – up, down, stuck, rigid or wobbling. Equanimity becomes more readily available as we get to fully understand that mental behaviour is changeable, not an identity and prone to flaws. Then one doesn't feel frustrated, impatient or disappointed by the actions of others. Please see the sections on **Kindness and Compassion** and **Sublime States** in this part of the book, as well as **Self-Acceptance** in Part Three, for detailed instructions on these themes.

Aversion can also be towards inanimate things rather than humans and other creatures – such as towards the flavour of unfamiliar food, or the stain on a carpet. The recommendation here is to regard such things as just what they are, not going in accordance with one's own preferences. Also things, like excrement, that may fill us with disgust should be regarded as made up of elemental matter. It's salutary to consider that a morsel of tastefully prepared and garnished food changes from being a source of delight to one of disgust within seconds of it being eaten!

Which is the true state? Actually, these are just elements and changing impressions.

- **Dullness and Lethargy**

This manifests as the inability to have a clear focus, an available source of energy or a firm attention. The mind is dreamy, resistant to applying any effort, which feels uncomfortable. However, the state of dullness and lethargy isn't comfortable either, and there is an urge to go unconscious or fall asleep. Here, the problem is that the mind doesn't sustain any topic; the remedy then is to provide simple ones that don't require a refined focus. Open your eyes to lessen the effect of the dull, drifting state. Focus around the eyes and the temples, asking 'What is felt here?' Keep the attention active. Check the posture and sweep up the spine, giving energy to supporting a downward push through the tail and the inward curve of the lower back. Straighten out any hunching over in the upper back and neck. Keep attending to the body, slowly and clearly connecting to each part and bringing it to mind. Beware of just reciting the name of the body part that you're attending to, without bringing to mind an aspect of the sensation or energy that is felt there. If it seems that you're not feeling anything, note that – how is that? How do you know you have a body? How do you know you're here?

- **Restlessness**

Restlessness is a prime contender for any available slot in the thinking mind, where it manifests as worry. Worry has an anxious feel to it, and is characterised by its inability to arrive at resolution coupled with the compulsion to keep the topic of concern in the spotlight of attention. As far as topics go, it's good to shift the mind from worrying over details by considering mortality, and also that value and enjoyment are to be found in the present moment. A restless mind is not far from enquiry. The hindrance can be transformed by investigation, so investigate the state to discern the bodily and emotional tones that accompany it. This will turn attention out of the obsession with an irresolvable topic to a place where there is rest: in the simple groundedness of the bones as we sit, stand, walk or recline with mindfulness.

## • **Doubt, Wavering**

This hindrance flourishes when we expect certainty from the thinking mind. So the overall strategy is to change the mode through which we operate and find definition. For this the inclination has to be towards **direct knowing** (*abhiññā*) rather than abstract thought.

For example, the topics that arouse doubt may be about one's worth – but this has to be experienced not as a matter of opinion but through directly acknowledging specific qualities, skilful and unskilful, in the present moment. And what we can know directly is that love or irritation, sadness or joy, forms a changing mixture of qualities, and is not a fixed personal possession. All that really rests with us is the awareness of that changeable flux. Of this there is no doubt.

Also, when you have a balanced look into the qualities of mind, that very looking in inclines towards the skilful and feels disturbed by the unskilful. So you also get the sense of your moral intuition, something that your personality may not recognize it has. As long as we don't recognize our basic goodness, then the mind is uncertain and seeks affirmation through opinions.

Another topical basis for uncertainty is uncertainty about the future, one's own or that of others. But the future is always unknowable – because it isn't here yet. Also, one can't be what one should or could be and what one is right now at the same time. All that we can directly be aware of is how it is. This may mean that either aspiration or despond is present, but the path is to directly feel out the qualities of those. As we do this, these states tend to transmute into joy, in the case of aspiration, or equanimity in the case of anxiety or despond.

Doubt, or uncertainty, is in many ways a crucial hindrance. It can be the end result of all the others, forming a gulf in our self-confidence or our ability to have access to the Dhamma. It can mount into depression. However, when it is handled skilfully, it can show us the ephemeral nature of what we reach out to, and reveal an awareness that doesn't reach

forward or back. In this instance, it is transmuted from a hindrance that stirs up agitation and gloom into one of the three signs of release – changeability. The characteristic of changeability (*anicca*) also refers to the uncertainty of the sensory and conceptual world systems that we feel bound to. Giving wise consideration to this characteristic helps one to give up chasing after certainty and instead rely on mindful awareness of the present and changeable state of affairs. This mindful knowing can stand on its own ground, and you can depend on it. Uncertainty can then support faith: we can be here with the changeable.

### **Address energies**

Addressing the energy of a hindrance takes some skill and practice, because the energy I'm referring to is not an area that we are normally familiar with. 'Energy' in this instance is not an applied effort, but the involuntary somatic 'charge,' like an electric current, that accompanies mental-states. It can be sensed (quite easily with powerful emotions like rage or fear) around the eyes and mouth, in the solar plexus, across the top of the chest or in the palms of the hands. This somatic energy is the bodily aspect of the energy of the heart, the emotional energy. So when one gets affected, the other does too; and these energies can either bind mental awareness into hindering states, or support the deepening ease of right concentration. Therefore the skill here is to deal with the bodily aspect in a simple mindful way, by spreading a calm and unconstricted awareness over the whole body, bearing the hindrance-energy in mind – rather like smoothing the creases out of a sheet. This 'smoothing' of awareness will calm and level the energy, and the mind will come out of the hindrance.

Because hindrances may not always be apparent at first, it's good to check in with the overall state of somatic energy. First of all, get in touch with the sense and sensations of the body and spread awareness over the entirety with the overall attitude of goodwill, empathy and letting go. Establish and monitor the upright axis. Then the practice is simply to keep bringing attention to a discernible restriction or agitation in the energy in parts of the body, steadying attention to receive its changing quality.

Explore it, wonder over it: what is it like? This is what evaluation is about. It brings a kind of resonance with an experience which means you can assess it without judgement.

You can then sweep the entire body, a little at a time, and then as a whole, checking for tension or numbness. Massage the body with mental awareness. Mindfulness of breathing is particularly useful because that flow of energy tends to snag or be uneven around unbalanced body energy. It is also the prime means for spreading healthy energy through the body. Breathe through the tightness or the fluttering – with no attempt to change, release or understand anything. Put the attitudes aside, and attend with goodwill, empathy and letting go.

With lethargy and restlessness, the need to address the energy in the body and mind is quite obvious. So when there is restlessness – a tense state in which one feels endlessly busy – how does that express itself in terms of body sensation and energy? What is happening in the chest, back of the head, legs and hands? In this way, restlessness turns into the investigative energy that's needed for insight-wisdom. With the dull low-energy state of lethargy, what helps is not fighting it or trying to generate more energy, but adapting the focus and the pace of the meditation to something that is more compatible. Fighting and struggling just uses more of the limited supply of energy and one gets frustrated and irritable. What will bring a balance is steadily drawing attention to the sensations around the eyes, in the neck and the temples – without trying to feel brighter. Here it adapts, or transmutes, into an equanimous stillness. In ways such as these, we draw the energy of the hindrances back into the domain of mindfulness of body.

With thoughts that depend on and stimulate sense-desire – there is a minor gratification, but the insatiable and restless nature of fantasy is frustrating. Moreover, the energy of reaching out is disorienting: we lose where we are. What can help is to acknowledge what the energy is reaching out from: maybe loss, boredom, loneliness...Try keeping the awareness steadily reaching in to the hungry place. Work with suffusing

the entire body with the energy that accompanies breathing. Sense-desire is a frustrated wish for comfort. It can turn into warmth and ease if tackled rightly.

Ill will prevents one's attention from noticing the place, and the moment, where its process begins. Its apparently aggressive energy wants to defend awareness from feeling pain. So don't fight ill will! It needs to be understood. Explore the tone of the energy and, breathing into it, relax its agitation. Let the awareness be spacious, and in any pause that occurs, listen in. Be content to do just that; find the right distance, one that doesn't create pressure. Notice the particular and specific epicentre of the ill will, rather than the diffusive generalizations. Gather a steady and empathic awareness at a trustable distance around that epicentre. When it isn't going out into topics, the energy of ill will adapts to be a source of precise, discriminative discernment.

Sometimes doubt and wavering are a chronic habit of not firming up into the present moment. Giving specific attention to the body circumvents the flux of opinions. So get familiar with that, and ask the mind to wait in unknowing...to replace conceptual certainty with a receptivity that uses the steadiness of embodiment for support.

Applying attention to the energies that carry the hindrances is a very thorough process that brings around their transmutation. When you address these energies, really attend to the energy you directly experience, and not the notion of what is causing it. This is 'knowing the mental process in the mental process.' Thus: 'fast moving, agitated, flushing' rather than 'angry,' or: 'stiff constriction' rather than 'fear' or 'control.' This way of practice is aimed at unfolding the tangled energy of the hindrance (rather than the idea of cutting the hindrance out of the mind); therefore, what counts is that the energy of the awareness with which you approach the hindrance is itself open, easeful and empathic. Any judgemental attitudes, however justified they are in rational terms, will add their energies to the current mind-state; and they are less helpful and healing than the direct, non-judgemental energy of open steady

awareness. Truly, with this mode of relating to our own blocks, shadows and lost places, we can learn about the power of awareness. It's a whole domain of the mind that can get sidelined. But in meditation, it's the main focus for development. And right here in the experience of the hindrances, we can realize the power of awareness to heal and make whole. Then the energies that were hindered become a balanced resource.



## Theory:

### Meditation and the Path to Awakening

*I have seen an ancient path, an ancient road traversed by the rightly enlightened ones of former times. And what is this ancient path, that ancient road? It is this Noble Eightfold Path, that is: right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Along that I have gone, and going along it I have fully come to know decay-and-death, I have fully come to know the arising of decay-and-death, I have fully come to know the ceasing of decay-and-death, I have fully come to know the way going to the ceasing of decay-and-death. [S. 12. 65]*

### What is Awakening?

The short-term aim of meditation is to bring calm and stability to the mind/heart, and through that provide a basis for insight into the issues that govern our lives. Such fundamental life-topics as pain and pleasure, wanting and resisting, identity and relationship – are all food for insight when we have the skills to contemplate and handle them wisely. This long-term process is summarized in the Buddha's **Eightfold Path** – which comprises overall perspective, aims, moral development and meditation. It is both a comprehensive way out of causing conflict and pain for each individual and a way to bring the fruits of cultivation into the world in which we live. To fully comprehend and integrate this Path is called 'Awakening.'

Any path has to have a sense of direction or purpose: a going from and a going to. The Buddha did teach an end to the Path – called ‘**Nibbāna**,’ or sometimes ‘the Deathless’ – at which point the notion of Path ceases to be useful, because Nibbāna is the end of coming and going. This experience is impossible to define in words, except to say the Path doesn’t create it, but reveals this freedom as our fullest potential. More often than talking about Nibbāna, the Buddha focused on what are called the **Four Noble Truths** as the understanding that leads there. These Truths are: that in our lives there is suffering and stress (*dukkha*), which can range from dissatisfaction to anguish; that it has an origination; that through abandoning the origination there can be a stopping of suffering and stress; and that there is a Path that leads to that stopping. In this formulation, the sense of Path, a sense of direction or purpose, fits well.

These Four Noble Truths have to be worked on; they aren’t always apparent. A lot of the time we don’t abandon the origin of suffering and stress, but rather shift the topic that is triggering it. Just as we scratch an itch, or fidget in a chair rather than let go of irritability, we commonly turn the mind away from its edginess and onto a source of pleasure. Then again sometimes we react to getting hurt or frustrated by losing our temper, blaming someone or getting depressed. This reactivity isn’t always something we have much say over: lose someone you’re fond of and it’s likely that you’ll feel down for quite a while. We all respond in that way, but these responses don’t get to the roots of the problem, which is the reactivity in our hearts. Cultivation of the Path, in its eight aspects, is the Buddha’s remedy for clearing the heart from both these afflictive strategies and the underlying Unknowing from which they originate. It is through this Unknowing that we want what we can’t keep, fight with the way things are and ignore the full fruition of which our systems are capable.

The process of Awakening entails holding the potential for liberation in mind and strengthening the Path in terms of outer action and meditation. It also means waking up to and dismantling the source of suffering in

terms of our inner mental action. Some heart/mind responses are impaired with what are called **defilements** (*kilesa*), so-called because they defile the brightness of which the mind is capable. Defilements occur as specific incidents: jealousy over someone else's success; hankering after a particular food; irritation over delay, etc. So instead of experiencing empathy, contentment or patience, we suffer. However, through reflection and training we can realign ourselves to see that other people's happiness doesn't do us any harm, so why not feel some gladness on their behalf. This means we tune in to empathy: I feel good when I can wish others well, feel compassion for them and so on. On another count, rather than get irritated and angry over what life is doing to us, we can turn it around by reflecting some warmth to ourselves and just weathering through. After all, when you're getting a rough deal, why make it worse by burning up inside over it? Furthermore, we can learn to let go of the neediness that keeps us running after the bait of material things. With some work on the mind, you get to know your own value and you don't need all that stuff. It cuts out a lot of stress.

When we cultivate like this, we begin to appreciate the clearer, more easeful and agile mind that is revealed. So as a result of adjusting our behaviour and attitude, we get to know our innate balance and well-being. That's the way the Path works: suffering and the way out; problems are a spur to cultivation. This ability to lessen the confusion and turmoil in our lives gives us the confidence and skill to develop meditation.

Meditation also reveals ingrained flaws of the heart called **hindrances** (*nīvarana*) – so called because they hinder the enjoyment of a pure mental awareness. We've looked at these in the previous section: covetousness or sense-desire; ill will; dullness and lethargy; worry, agitation and doubt. The last of these is not doubt over an external fact, (what is the capital of Mauritania anyway?) but the doubt about one's presence and value. It amounts to loss of confidence, despair and depression. The first goal of meditation is to free the mind from the effect of these hindrances, even temporarily. Even more than with the freedom from defilements, the mind gets to feel really good, and that makes the work of tackling the

hindrances well worthwhile. The hindrances go down in proportion to the arising and strengthening of spiritual qualities that eradicate them, and the overall effect is to make one's mental awareness steady, agile, penetrative and peaceful.

Until these skilful factors are present, most of us wouldn't recognize that there are subtler and more deep-rooted biases in the mind. These are so ingrained that we take them for granted, but they also support suffering. Take for example the notion that there's something that we should be or have that isn't here right now. Conditions change, from good days to bad days, but with this bias, the basic message continues that we should get somewhere, get something, experience something that lasts and belongs to us. The tempo may slow down, but the push goes on. Such biases (*āsava*) occur around the hunger for sense-input or 'sensuality' (*kāmāsava*), 'being or becoming something' (*bhavāsava*) and plain old 'missing the point' or 'Unknowing' (*avijjāsava*). They are also called '**influxes**' because they flow into the way the mind operates, and therefore influence the way it apprehends and relates to experience.

We all might agree, for example, that a rose is beautiful, without pausing to acknowledge that the labelling 'beautiful' occurs in our minds: dogs and toads don't experience roses as beautiful. Not that they're 'ugly' either. This influx is a problem because it sets up a mentality that clings to sense-objects, may get obsessed and possessive about them, and fears and grieves over their inevitable change and demise. Exchange 'roses' for 'my body' and the analogy probably becomes clearer. This influx of sensuality is a basis for suffering. It tells us that the only things that are around, including much of what we take ourselves to be, are sensory objects. And yet, we can't retain the pleasant ones, nor can we avoid the unpleasant ones; things keep changing. However, we can't bear and dwell in that recognition unless the mind has its own stability and resources. Hence, meditative training is to bring spiritual support in terms of '**factors of Awakening**' (*bojjhanga*) to the fore. These, which represent the resources and the way to Awakened awareness, are: mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture/uplift, calm/tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity.

The influx of 'becoming' is the temporal sense that our identity is based upon: I am a being in time with a past, who has arrived at this present and will persist into this future. The clarity of meditation allows one to experience in the present that the past is a memory occurring now, the future is an expectation occurring now, and what one is in the present is a direct knowing of senses, ideas, impressions and reactions that come and go. This present awareness can't be found in any object or mind-state. So if this most essential quality isn't locatable in terms of what we normally assume ourselves to be...why do we ignore it for so much of the time?

Well, we miss the point. This is the main obstacle, the major influx: that of Unknowing, of not being in touch with this present awareness. If we're not in touch with that, we can't train it to integrate into our lives.

Unknowing is the absence, or the covering-up of full unbiased awareness. In specific instances it may mean that a person has a very restricted access to qualities such as trust, self-respect or empathy. At times this Unknowing flares up for all of us: we may feel stressed at addressing a large number of people; we may feel miserable at being on our own; we are subject to paranoia and feelings of pointlessness unless we are with something that reassures or uplifts us. We've missed our own value and present freedom. This is the effect of Unknowing: we get lost in a trance of what we should be, might be and maybe aren't, and then lock into these constricted states of being.

Meditative training can clear these influxes. It's only then that we can live in an unbiased and unafflicted way. So we work on dispelling afflicted mental states in our daily lives as well as in our meditation. And when we understand meditation and its peaceful states to be a means and not an end in their own right, the less we're going to get caught in the influx of trying to become calmer and calmer. There can be a lot of suffering in that!

## What is the Path?

At first approach, meditation can appear to be a series of techniques that stand apart from the other activities of life. This notion has some truth in it: meditation does get well-established and thrives in a situation where we can be alone, or sitting quietly with friends, in a place that is free from disturbances. It's good to set aside a time every day when we change gear and let go of how we normally operate and even who we assume ourselves to be. However, this idea can put us out of touch with the cultivation of a Path to Awakening in which how we speak and act have a crucial part to play. Ideally the way we do the things we do in our daily life should feed into the meditation, and the attitudes and understanding that arise out of meditation should feed back into our daily lives. So that even though we may change gears, we're still riding the same vehicle in the same direction. And the direction is a simple yet profound one: towards complete release from suffering and stress. This, rather than any esoteric ideal or theory, is what Awakening is about.

So of course meditation is supposed to affect how we feel in the long term; and it's probably also obvious this means that it brings around changes in how we act. However it's sometimes not fully understood that how we act is a necessary precondition for meditation. In fact, if meditation doesn't make use of the strength and purpose that we've employed in the wider sphere of our lives, it is like a plant with poor roots. Meditation is going to be positively affected if we have geared our minds in terms of compassion, honesty and clarity. If our speech is harsh, it affects how we think and our awareness has to receive the results of that — not to mention the feedback we get from other people if we act in these ways. To put it simply, what we do has an immediate effect on how we will be. It's also the case that if we are generous, responsible and looking towards Awakening in our lives, actions that issue from those roots will have a beneficial effect.

The process whereby actions have effects is called '**kamma.**' The truth of kamma is an aspect of the truth of mutual conditioning (or interdependence): that is, all states arise dependent on others. Just as ice needs water and a certain temperature in order to manifest, or as our bodies need air, water and physical food to keep going, so our awareness – the 'heart' of the mind – can only manifest in terms of the conditions that we have established it in as the daily norm. In ethical terms, this conditionality also means that the good we have done will lay down a residue of brightness and support: it can't be otherwise. If this weren't the case, there would be no real benefit in kindness, generosity or doing good, and no harm in violence and dishonesty. So there would be no sense of right and wrong, and no Path going anywhere. But because we can sense that there is a purpose in doing good, there is a Path – and it leads out of inflicting pain on ourselves and others. The purpose of this Path is to get out of suffering. So the understanding of kamma is the core of Buddhism. It is called 'right view' (*sammā-ditthi*), the first factor of the Buddha's Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path covers the way we live: right view deals with basic attitudes and norms, right intent relates to our directed intentions, to what we aim to bring forth in our lives. These represent the 'wisdom' aspect of the Path. Right speech, right action and right livelihood deal with how we get on with our lives in their changing context – this is about goodness and virtue. Right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration cover the cultivation of awareness – the 'meditation' aspect of the Path. To offer a brief overview of the eight factors, I'd like to reflect on the three factors that generate and support all the others – right view, right effort and right mindfulness.

Right view gives personal, immediate value to any factor: for example it helps me to recognize that if I cultivate right speech, I can live free from regret and with a clear heart. Right view is therefore regarded as the paramount Path factor because it not only sets up the parameters for the other factors by outlining the truth of kamma, but it also suggests where we need to look for Awakening. That is, we need to access, dwell in and

draw from that awareness in us which respects others and ourselves and does not wish to harm others or ourselves; we need to centre ourselves in that heart which inclines towards trusting and being trustworthy, helping and appreciating how we have been helped. This is the sense of **conscience and concern** (*hiri-ottappa*) that values all life. Conscience and concern are natural qualities: that is, they are present when we are at ease and fully authentic. However, these qualities get buried by abusive or deluded behaviour – and such behaviours get acquired through any attitude that gives more value to what we can get and make and have than to goodness of heart. This is wrong view. So if the ability to respect, to love and to experience gratitude has been buried under anxiety, mistrust and a sense of meaninglessness, we need to regain that capacity. Otherwise what kind of mind are we going to be meditating with?

The most damaging twist in the conditioning of wrong view is self-denigration. This is because if we don't amount to anything to ourselves, there's no confidence (and no point) in cultivating the mind or Awakening. Wrong view gets stimulated by attitudes that measure us in terms of performance. We acquire these through life in the human world. That is, we are valued by how well we do in terms of the quicksand world of material success and social status – in which there are more losers than winners. The result is that many of us incline at times to viewing ourselves as inadequate or born losers, that 'I'm not much good, so of course I can't expect much; and as I'm of little value, I have to work twice as hard for half the rewards just to be acceptable.' This view, which can linger in an unspoken way in the back of the mind, prevents us from fully appreciating the good that we have done – of which the bottom line is the bad that we could have done and haven't!

So with wrong view, we lose touch with the common ground: that we can all be of benefit to ourselves and others, and we all have the potential for Awakening. Without that confidence, all effort, even in meditation, is an attempt to prove that we are good enough. This never works: whatever good we do is never good enough while wrong view is intact. It distorts and finds fault with everything. So meditation shifts the criteria for self-



regard away from performance and becoming something in the future towards valuing intrinsic goodness and bringing it forth. Otherwise our practice has no firm foundation and lacks the uplift we need to keep going.

Right effort, (*sammā-vāyāma*) the second of the three overriding factors, is described in four ways. Actually, the ways are paired: one pair of efforts is that of uplifting and then protecting what is truly worthy in ourselves. What is truly worthy in ourselves gets revealed when, with right view, we come from an attitude of conscience and concern. Then the effort is to bring that intrinsic wisdom and goodness to bear on the mental and emotional afflictions that hold us back.

The other pair of right efforts involves putting aside and protecting the heart and mind from attitudes, thoughts and behaviours that degrade ourselves and others. There are aspects of moral conduct that are quite natural to pick up when we reflect on the pain of abusive behaviour. However, we don't always recognize that the psychology of self-denigration also has to be cleaned from our ongoing awareness: ill will spoils our perception of ourselves as often as it does that of others. Is it possible to contemplate and check the voice of self-criticism? If we are still and focusing on ourselves, can we feel OK with that? Do we find that part of our need to be busy is to stop the mood swinging back to the default of feeling hopeless and inadequate? It's not that we have no shortcomings, but when these get the exclusive block capital headlines, this is ill will, an absence of graciousness towards ourselves. And the fruition of this form of ill will is doubt – the sense that my life has no meaning and no purpose. Between ill will and doubt are hankering, dullness and restless worry. So right view in terms of effort is to understand that it's for cleansing the mind, so that we can bring forth our best for ourselves and others.

If there is right view, the hindrances can be approached as habits conditioned into the mind, rather than as something that we really are. Then our practice is both to cut the attitudes and scenarios that support these afflictive habits, and to see with mindfulness that they're based on

no real identity. So the balance of effort in all aspects of the Path is struck by entering into a fundamental trust and appreciation of one's aware heart. Then, because one is worthy, one casts off attitudes and behaviours that are not worthy of oneself. We incline towards curing the sickness rather than punishing the patient.

Right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*) is the factor that brings right view and right effort into specific application in any aspect of the Path. It is an attention that is sustained over what is presently arising in our awareness – within ourselves or in the situation around us. It places our focus on present clarity rather than the way it should be, or the way I'm supposed to be, or what you're always like, and what will happen if...So it curtails personal history and the descriptions through which we have grown to regard ourselves and others. This radical simplicity and freedom from bias attends to moods, thoughts, sensations, energies and passions as that which arises in the present rather than as life-journey luggage that we are pleased or disgusted with. When we understand with right view the nature of afflictions as conditions rather than as self, they can be handled as itinerant blemishes without adding shame and guilt to the pile of stress. This handling is mindfulness. So mindfulness is a 'pure' approach because it sees things purely as they are.

As it is applied to the specific presence of a phenomenon, right mindfulness brings around the realization of change – that a feeling or a thought moves in a pattern of rising up and subsiding. We don't have to do a whole lot with it. This realization alleviates the immediate reactivity by which confused habits and hindrances gain power. As we thus weaken the power of those reactions, mindfulness puts us in touch with a purity which they generally obscure. This process is notably (but not exclusively) the case with the formal exercises of mindfulness that constitute meditation. In these, through attending within a prescribed frame of reference (such as breathing in and out) we challenge the habits that get built into our normal activities. That is, in normal life, we attend to something because it promises us well-being, or because we have to: these are habits of expectation or compulsion that are sources of stress. In

meditation we attend to how things are in order to strengthen attention itself. If we get bored, we acknowledge the bored state as it is, rather than react to it. If it persists and begins to capture attention, we work with it in various ways. And so on with restlessness, sorrow...and all the mood swings that normally govern our lives; mindfulness keeps the attention from being swayed. In this way, meditation is of supreme importance in living a responsible and free life.

Mindfulness also connects us to the refreshing ‘rest states’ of right concentration (*sammā-samādhi*). In the case of a beginner, an appreciation of what this might be occurs whenever there’s an experience of mental stillness – even for a few seconds. The uplift of experiencing this is a special kind of pleasure, that of restful wakefulness. This kind of pleasure doesn’t cause the attention to jump or contract around it; it is spacious and offers an opportunity for our attention to deepen. It has an ease that nourishes and strengthens. This is the calm well-being of right concentration.

As I’ve explained them, the three main Path factors support each other in a consecutive sense. It’s also the case that the support runs the other way. If there’s no right effort, no encouraging and abstaining, then how do we clear away wrong view? And if there’s no right mindfulness, how do we know where and to what degree to apply effort? Clearing cobwebs with a sledgehammer is more likely to do harm than good. So the Path is a cooperative process of factors circling around and correcting. Mindfulness takes us into the enjoyment of inner purity, which is the flowering of right view. We recognize that good kamma makes us feel good; and that insight deepens confidence in the Path as a whole.

So meditation is not a matter of trying to get somewhere or become something, but of Awakening to a purity that is a potential with which we’ve lost touch. As that purity is fully revealed, it is freed from obscuration; being freed, it does not depend on this or that. Eventually it doesn’t even depend on a Path: the Path leads to its own transcending.

However, in terms of where we are now, practice hinges around accessing and using the wisdom and goodness towards which all the eight Path factors contribute. If there's no access to wisdom or goodness, then the meditation is not going to flow. And if meditation has to be forced or supported by beliefs, then, rather than giving rise to a natural unfolding, it adds more layers over the purity. Heart and mind don't become peaceful on demand. But they can attune to and settle into an Awakening process: the process that brings peace to our ongoing life.

## Theory: the Sublime States

*This is how you should train yourself: 'Kindness...compassion...appreciative joy...equanimity as my release of awareness, will be developed, pursued, made into a vehicle, given a grounding, steadied, consolidated and well-undertaken.'* [A. 8.63]

There are four mind-states that sustain the practice of Dhamma in relationship – both to others and to ourselves. These are: **kindness** (*mettā*), **compassion** (*karunā*), **appreciative joy** (*muditā*) and **equanimity** (*upekkhā*); collectively they're called the 'sublime states' (*brahmavihāra*). They are ways of directing awareness with an intent that is amply endowed, uplifted, without boundaries, free from hatred and ill will – to others as to oneself.

Lofty as they may sound, these sublime states are based on our ability to relate to other beings and ourselves in a healthy way in the changing circumstances that make up our world. If we don't develop these basic attitudes, we can't meet the world in an adequate way. The way that we relate becomes marked with mistrust and frustrated needs – syndromes that hinder the true potential of the heart. In the worst instances, we eventually close the heart and assume it's impossible to meet the world at all.

We may recognize that we have limitations in this respect: 'I'm fine with you on a good day in a low-pressure situation'; 'I respect myself when I'm doing well and getting some positive attention.' So there are limitations,

and these form boundaries within which I feel alive and receptive, and outside of which I start to go numb, or seek to escape. I escape from the hurt of feeling left out or of failing by shutting down sensitivity and turning my attention elsewhere...These sublime states are therefore not just about being nice to other people; they are about freeing ourselves from deadening reactions. Ill will is a kind of sickness.

If we can extend goodwill more constantly, independent of circumstance, our ability to be free from underlying states of guilt, anxiety, bitterness, cynicism and depression increases. All such states are products of ill will. Other more prominent aspects of ill will are hatred, spite and abuse – even when it is the act of belittling another being in one’s own mind. Such thinking may have serious consequences: the prejudice that justifies violence is based on the bias that other beings don’t count for much. And thinking in such abusive ways also undermines the well-being of the thinker.

Correct cultivation of the sublime states can go deeply into any ‘life-statement’ we may have and bring around a shift: we can come out of being the victim (who has to put up with feeling abused and second-rate), the renegade (who has to fight against their world) or the survivor (who endures the mess they experience their world as being). All this semi-anaesthetised ill will stems from being unable to release fear or grief or anger. If we don’t use benevolence and compassion to acknowledge a hurt state and heal it, we are forced to manage it by shrugging it off, blaming others or assuming that somehow we shouldn’t expect anything better.

The truth of the heart is that these sublime states are innate; they get sealed off by curtailing the very process whereby painful feelings heal themselves. That is, if the heart is open, it can be fully with the hurt, and give it the energy that allows it to heal, just as the body does to its wounds. The sense of feeling hurt is a natural effect, like a bruise, that redresses itself when we stay with it in an open and clear way. But when the heart is not able or willing to be with its hurts, the process is cut short. Shortcuts include lashing out at whatever has triggered that pain, or criticising the

sense of hurt as weak or foolish, or not acknowledging the painful feeling. We may even dismiss sensitivity altogether. Then instead of a temporary retraction, we get a long-term contraction. We give up on love and compassion as natural states and get tough or indifferent instead. The heart contracts out of openness to avoid getting hurt – but in this contracted state, it can't experience joy and trust. So we become anxious, and feel that we have to be something, or have something, or be approved of in order to feel OK. Living with this kind of management is a dismal actuality for many of us – for some or all of the time, life can feel intrinsically flawed, despite our best efforts.

The practices of kindness, compassion, etc. don't rest upon manufacturing emotional states. They are based upon ways of adjusting our impressions to allow a natural, relational health to come forth. We practise the sublime states not just for someone else's sake, but for releasing our own awareness from the cramp of cynicism or bitterness. So the cultivation of *mettā* isn't about imposing an ideal of liking or loving everyone all the time, but a specific practice of meeting the mood of the moment without aversion: 'I can be with, not add to and let go of the jealousy or resentment that has just arisen.' This non-aversion frees up the intent of the mind and allows a return to the natural state of kindness and compassion.

If we can prevent disappointment and conflict from cramping into ill will, we don't have to dump our ill will onto others to find some relief. We can stop complaining about the way other people are. If we can stop complaining about others, we may also release ourselves from complaining about how we ourselves are. So the two aspects of the practice – towards ourselves and towards others – support each other. We may still feel the pang of losing contact with something pleasant, or of being touched by something unpleasant, and yet be able to curtail the contraction into bitterness or depression. We can support ourselves in feeling the feeling and letting it flow through. We may still feel some hurt, but we don't get damaged by it. As always, mindfulness is the key.

We enter the practice by first establishing a mind-state that is not at this time affected by ill will. Then we reflect and linger on that state. The very

fact of bringing attention onto a state of well-being, or basic OK-ness, amplifies it. Further practice entails extending that awareness over our whole state of being. Often we are divided: there are aspects that we can acknowledge, are comfortable with or accept and aspects that we are half-aware of, feel ill at ease with or dread. The divisions form inner boundaries. These boundaries are often marked by being ashamed of or trying to control the unacceptable moods that we sense beyond them. We may for example, feel intimidated or irritated by other people's behaviour, and not know how to handle that feeling. So we close that uncomfortable feeling off behind a boundary. Another boundary may separate what I am to myself from how I appear to others: I dread others seeing, even sympathetically, some of my emotions and moods. These boundaries then inform how I sense others. For example, how I sense others may be characterised as 'that which I cannot relax or feel trust with; those whom I'm inferior to.' But you can't really be good-hearted to people if you see them through the fence of mistrust. The priority therefore is to first unlock the relational process by clearing the internal ill will when one is alone, and then when one is with others. This is the case whether the state is kindness, compassion, appreciative joy or equanimity.

The four states differ in their character and also in terms of the illness that they are applied to. Kindness has a nourishing quality; it has the intent to touch into the good and then to extend it. Compassion is the protective intent: to sense the afflicted, shield it from further damage and heal it. Appreciative joy senses and participates in others' goodness and good fortune. Equanimity serenely stays with the good and the bad, understanding them both to be kamma – processes rather than personal belongings.

These practices are to be extended to others. We may feel ourselves unwilling to be in someone's presence or give them much attention; even when we think of them, there is a retraction of heart with irritation or fear. So this would call for kindness: an inclination that senses the lovability of another person and moves towards providing welfare and nourishment. When we are aware of the limitations or disabilities of



others, compassion is the response that counteracts the intention to abuse, belittle or dismiss them: we acknowledge their vulnerability and pain, their need for shelter and protection, and empathize with that. Appreciative joy counteracts jealousy and apathy towards others: wanting them to enjoy their good fortune means that we share in their happiness. Equanimity counteracts the tendency to get excited or depressed over events in the world or in the lives of other people. How we actually proceed from these states into action depends on what a situation allows: the general advice is to relax, stay present and act naturally...

As mentioned above, the sublime states help us to cross over the boundaries that create divisions. So we need first of all to find the boundary that is present by investigating the particular source of the division – whether it’s because at this time and place ‘I don’t regard you as acceptable to me’ or ‘I don’t regard myself as acceptable to you’ or even ‘I’m not acceptable to myself.’ Maybe in some situations you intimidate me, and I feel out-of-empathy with you. There is a boundary within which the awareness contracts and starts piling up states of fear, shame and irritation like sandbags. The first part of the practice is to curtail that piling up. *So we separate the state from what has evoked it:* here is my sense of being intimidated by you; can I be with that emotion and leave ‘you’ and ‘me’ out of it? I put aside blaming you and despising myself. Then we can keep handling the state until we are no longer caught in it: it’s a conditioned thing, it’s not somebody’s fault. After this, we can extend awareness in that same vein: I can imagine you outside of this particular relationship, as in the same predicament as myself – subject to birth, infirmity and death, not wanting pain, wanting happiness, needing to eat and sleep and feel safe. Recollecting our shared and obvious needs can restore the empathy that is the basis of a healthy relationship.

Now when I don’t react to or affirm a negative mood: isn’t there a possibility to feel the sadness of this habit; and doesn’t that arouse some wish for my own welfare? And what comes up when I imagine you as also subject to moods and conditioning? Such reflections allow our *brahmavihāra* potential to unfold in a natural way.

If we have a positive mood that arises with the perception of a person, or ourselves, the practice has the same approach: acknowledge the mood as distinct from the perception, and allow it to settle. The result is that the positive mood gathers mindfulness and clear comprehension. Then, rather than swapping the changing reality of agreeable feeling or impression for some gratifying image, we can relate clearly to the feeling and the impression without hanging on to it and making it into a person who has to be that way all the time. (And will probably not be like that all the time...and so there's disappointment...) The fulfilment of kindness is also the end of romance. This is not a misty process. We have to be able to let each other be changeable. Otherwise, adulation causes attachment and disappointment.

So the practice of the *brahmavihāra* is very direct. Eventually it's not even about me and you, but more about how we relate. It refers to the activation that occurs in the mind when it contacts a thought, an impression or a feeling. Right here, before self and other begin, is the place to bring up the intent: 'may there be no blame, no fear, no regret, no wavering.' Then one of the major sources of suffering and agitation, and of the positions that self-view gets founded on, has no room to grow. It is for this reason that the Buddha highlighted the *brahmavihāra* as a deliverance of the heart to be fully cultivated. Their relevance and benefits are available to us all.

## Kindness and Compassion

Centre your awareness in your body, being aware of the general form of the posture and the textures of the body. Acknowledge the spine and the structures that support the body's mass. Imagine you are sitting in an armchair, or in a warm, bright place that makes you feel good. Give yourself time to take that in. Let the steady rhythm of your breathing come to your attention... Sense how that is maintaining your life, with each in-breath and out-breath washing energy through the body. Feel the pulses in the body, governing the warm blood flow through the tissues. Take in the sense of all this as carrying and supervising your life force.

Draw your attention steadily from the most central core of your body out through the mass that surrounds it...the firm or soft tissues. Consider the vitality and sensitivity of all this. Pick up the sense of wishing it well, the inclination towards its health. Move that warm sense around the body, including places that feel unwell or neutral as well as vigorous.

Draw your attention out to the surface of your body, to how you sense the skin. Be aware of it like a sheet or a blanket enclosing your person. Be aware of it as a protective boundary; also acknowledge it as something that connects inner to outer and is porous. Feel the energies at this boundary tingling and pulsing as your body senses the outer world. Move between what is inside the skin – any sense of being 'in here' – and the sense of 'out there.' Acknowledge the alertness at this periphery; settle and calm there, keeping one's sense of 'out there' to be the space just a few centimetres in front of the body. Contemplate this space, sensing it wrapping the entire body like a second skin – above, below, in front, behind. Let your awareness move into this space, sensing it as a further

subtle layer, a finer skin that can also enclose, protect and connect in a suffusive way. Acknowledge the benevolence, the inclination to nurture. Let the sense of benevolence extend around you, aiming at nothing in particular, while maintaining the connection to the body. Settle into that sense of extended, unhindered openness with no object.

Contemplate the energy of connection, that which attunes to balance and harmony between inner and outer. Sit, stand, walk or recline in that, letting the awareness take in the feeling of being in harmony with your immediate surroundings.

Imagine the space itself sensing your body. Let the energy in the space radiate back over your skin...rather like a warm sun...first from the forward direction, over the general bodily form, then a zone at a time. Begin with the abdomen, letting the space receive the breathing movement there and take that in...then up over the chest...and any held or stiff places...and then over the throat, allowing full, easy breathing. Finally, let the energy wash over the face – the mouth, cheeks, eyes and brow – bathing each area and organ with kindness.

If there are difficulties with this, try to recollect an occasion when one received some kindness from another person. Recall how that felt, return to that feeling and try to sit within that in the present. Work kindness into the tissues, moving it around the entire body.



## for **Kindness**

Imagine someone you are fond of or someone you respect is going to move into that extended space. Notice if the energy changes, and stay connected to your bodily presence. Let the imagination rest. Bring up that impression of a friend several times, acknowledging any effects in terms of mood, and to what extent that affects your energy. Integrate the energy into the entire body, especially the back of the body. Don't lose parts of your body, or switch off parts of your extended awareness. With the

exercise of staying centred and whole, allow the friend to come nearer and be at a comfortable distance in front of you. Take in and send out the energy of well-being and kindness. Then let them move away, and maintain the energy and inclination of kindness.



Practise like this with a known person towards whom one has mixed feelings. Then practise with a neutral acquaintance. Don't attach to the mood changes. Keep the sense of connected space, your own bodily presence and the sense of exchanging energy: receive what is out there, and send forth what is in here. If what is out there seems unbalanced or overwhelming, consolidate your own presence by sensing the bodily core, then the surrounding mass, then the skin and the space immediately around. Let what is received wash over the periphery and be assimilated there, allowing it in as feels appropriate. You can conclude the practice there, or take it further.



If you choose to go further, practise like this with someone whose presence brings up negative states: perhaps of a milder degree at first, beginning with someone whom you caricature or make fun of – that lack of graciousness, that removal of dignity. Invite them into a connected space where you acknowledge the shared dilemmas and joys of existence. Then practise with the perception of someone whom you think does not respect or like you – that lack of warmth. Then maybe practise with someone who brings up anxiety, at first as if they were distant... and then coming closer at a pace and to a proximity with which you feel comfortable.

Keep your own presence clear. Whatever is received or comes up, keep your own conscious sending forth free from the wish to harm or blame. Keep your awareness connected to your own presence, to the impression of the other and to the space between you. Align your intentions to holding and letting the energy in that connection be free from ill will. Allow moods, perceptions and reactions to arise within that connected

space. Staying open allows them to subside within that kindly space. You can conclude the practice there, or take it further.



Practise this with perceptions of people of whom you think lowly or despise, and then those that bring up stronger aversion. Then pick up the less pleasing aspects of someone whom you generally like; and the worthy aspects of someone you dislike. The practice is to receive these perceptions and moods in a warm space, relaxing any contractions of ill will.




Then practise in this way with perceptions of yourself: from the favoured and successful and competent to the unfavourable, flawed and inadequate. ‘I have to carry all this, may I be well. May I hold this in an extended and kindly awareness.’

After an appropriate period of time, let the imagination rest, and wrap the kindness around and within your bodily presence.



### for **Compassion**

Practise the opening instructions of this section on page 98 down to the first line of 

From there, bring to mind the suffering of someone you know, with the sense that it’s important that you don’t get involved with, or react to their suffering, but you maintain a sense of well-wishing. The aim in the meditation is not to change their predicament (which of course you will do as best you can at another time). In this exercise, we are primarily interested in developing the sense of empathy, of feeling the energy that protects wake up and strengthen. We’re just looking into how that is experienced.

Give due consideration to the experience of vulnerability and being trapped that all creatures have at some time in their lives. Without changing it (the fact of it doesn't change), or turning away from it, stay attuned to that and notice any effects that has on your thinking, your emotions or your bodily awareness. It's not that there's anything that you have to feel, but just notice how it is.

When you have this sense of empathy, you can then practise extending it towards people you don't know very well, and subsequently to people you don't like.

Finally extend it towards your own vulnerability, and your experience of fallibility and limitation.



### **Difficulties**

(Please see **Great Heart** and **Empathy** in Part Two of this book for further advice)

You may assume that you have to bring up a positive loving attitude before it begins by itself. Part of the skill of the practice is to sense where a non-averse, at ease, state can be felt already and tuning in to that. Another part is to stay out of, or put aside, topics and impressions that generate ill will, resentment or depression, until you have the resources to heal those states. The sense of dwelling in kindness, rather than having to feel it, will then gradually grow by itself.

I choose beginning with the body because it doesn't carry negativity in terms of topics; and also because tuning into the body brings the mind out of both its topics and its agitated or depressed energies. However, you may also begin the practice by recollecting good people, or kind actions that have been done to you in your life. Then follow this with a recollection of good actions that you have done (or unskilful behaviour that you have put aside).

Sometimes we don't detect kindness. Consider it an 'at home, no pressure' feeling.

Sometimes we don't detect ill will. Consider people whom you assume to be less intelligent, less caring or less physically capable than yourself. How would you feel about being with them, talking with them, dining with them or working together? How do you feel about people of different ethnicity, gender or social status? If you detect a sense of shrinking away, can you be with that and relax that boundary? Outside of meditation, what would help you to do that?



### **If this form doesn't help you...**

Focus your practice on an animal that you feel warmed or delighted by.

Try talking about your life or your concerns with a sympathetic listener. If you feel that you don't have one, try helping other people and listening to them.



### **Further**

Focus on the experiences of kindness or compassion as mental phenomena. Sense how their good will spreads out, and let go of the images and impressions that support them. Focus on this heart-energy as a base for concentration.





# Part Two: Developing the Mind



*If a person speaks or acts with a pure mind,  
happiness follows them,  
like their inseparable shadow.*

DHAMMAPADA 2



## **Theory: Great Heart**

*...so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings. [Snp.149]*

Do you ever feel that you're on your own? That you're the odd one out, the flawed or failed one, the one who's getting a bad deal? Or that you really messed up in your life? Maybe as you're reading this, you're ill, or experiencing bereavement...maybe you're serving time in prison, maybe you're just feeling depressed or isolated. When you're feeling small or under pressure, what's needed is great heart.

Great heart is something that will develop for you through meditation. The simple practice of being mindful of sitting still or steady walking brings you to a firmer place in yourself, your still centre. This is because 'mind' is a mixture of heart and brain functions, in which the heart is predominantly involved with the steady receptivity we call mindfulness and clear comprehension. The heart is not just a metaphor for emotions and intuitions: the physical heart is an organ of perception that a) emits electro-magnetic impulses that check out what's happening and b) is in continual, neurological dialogue with the brain. So when we 'tune in' to a still body or the rhythm of breathing, the message we receive is that things are fine and the brain quietens down. This is the often overlooked function of the heart: it is a major contributor to direct experience (rather than figured out, learned or abstract knowledge).

This calm offers the space within which another major heart attribute can come forth. Heart-knowing is to do with feeling and it inclines to

coherence and ease. So through meditation, the warm emotional intelligence that we all have can open up and come forth. Also, the skills that you develop in referring to that inner ground will greatly strengthen your sense of balance and confidence, and that means you don't tend to get caught in burdened or speedy states of mind.

Meditation on the body, the direct experience of its feelings, energies and rhythms, brings the receptive heart into play. From there we can cultivate the heart as a centre of attitude and inclination by picking up the heart's natural inclination towards empathy (*anukampa*). Then, when we consciously attune our thinking to empathy with others, this heart-knowing is given a major boost and role in our lives. Empathy brings us out of the isolation within which we get tight, defensive or jealous, and it begins with the simple but often overlooked reflection that whatever state we're in, other people have been there, are there right now, will also come the same way – and get through it.

It may seem like small comfort, but when you develop this reflection it transforms that sense of being stuck in your predicament into the sense that 'we're in this together.' This sense provides a ground from which the mind can lift out of its downward spiral – because to have others there in the same struggle is an experience of solidarity. (That's one aspect of what 'Sangha,' the community of disciples, means.) Empathy gives you a place to stand. If we develop that sense of widening out of the narrow and trapped 'me' sense, we can get through what life is bringing us at this time, instead of plummeting down into despair, or churning up with bitterness. Because others have come through challenges, we can. This is the courage and confidence of the great heart – and it's in all of us.

As long as we keep in touch with this capacity, the great heart stays with us. It can bear with what's passing through us, and bring forth compassion for others. It mirrors and senses many changing states, but its reflective and empathic nature isn't in any particular state. Properly trained, it can sense a mental or physical state, reflect on it and also widen out of the limitations of that state. We don't have to deny a feeling, or get lost in the stories that our emotions evoke.

## Empathy: Developing the Heart-Sense for Life

In the following exercises we use steady attention as a tool to investigate the nature and domain of the great heart. Any and all of these should begin with adjusting your centre of perception from the abstract brain sense to the heart sense. The brain sense holds experience in generalized learned categories, such as 'Monday,' 'me,' 'the living room.' The heart sense gets experience in direct, present, specific detail: the clock is ticking, there's the smell of wax from the shiny polished table, my mood is quiet, slightly tired, my breathing is shallow. Whenever you take in the specific quality of how something is manifesting right now, the heart-sense comes into play. To allow it the room to do so, you must put aside all other imperatives and attitudes of what is important or necessary – be mindful in other words. You may notice a softening of the visual focus and a sense of relaxation. From there you can bring up the enquiry into feeling that supports empathy.



Spend some time, five to ten minutes, to get in touch with your bodily sense and with a few specific details of the world immediately around you, that which you can know through your senses. Notice that some give rise to agreeable and some to disagreeable feelings. Let that be the way it is.

Then consider how you are right now, how you feel as an overall sense. Maybe it's a good day, or you're relaxed...how does it feel to feel that way? Can you appreciate the health, happiness or ease and just be with it?

Bring to mind an occasion when you felt really good: fulfilled, at ease, welcomed – whatever feeling good means to you as an expression of heart.

Or imagine what it would be like, right now, to feel at ease. Keep bringing that memory or image back until you can linger in its effect, feeling the feeling and letting go of the idea or memory that evokes it.

Contemplate how that feels in your body, especially around the heart area. Feel your breathing move through that area, through your entire chest and open into that feeling. Imagine widening and softening, and keep steadily relaxing the chest, solar plexus and jaw. As these areas unlock, let the breath-energy bring the heart-feeling to the entire body.

Distil the sense of that into something sacred, something that is a part of your heart independent of time and place.

Holding that as a wide field of awareness, contemplate whatever felt senses arise and move through it. Relax any attempt to understand or react to tingles and shifts; keep returning to the wide field of heart-awareness as if it were a pool of water through which other energies could pass, and within which they can dissolve.



When this reference is established, you can bring topics to mind. Maybe there are some worries or concerns or even distress. Maybe the pleasant state seems fragile. How does it feel to feel like that? Is there any sense of support or sympathy with that?

Consider what that feeling depends upon – your health, your financial position, your relationship with another, your idea of what the future holds...What would it be like to put those matters aside for half an hour? Is there anything stopping you from doing so?

Try that again...what would it be like not to base your state of being, good or bad, on the current state of affairs? If you sense an opening there, feel into that, and sense how or even who you are in that open space. Is there anything stopping you from being at peace with yourself? If so,

acknowledge how that feels. The nagging sense, or the sense of holding or of being stuck – what does that feel like? Does all of that have a bodily effect – such as tightness in the head or shoulders?

Then how do you feel about that sense of holding or being stuck? Can there be some empathy, some compassion maybe, for that? Without trying to change it, what would it be like if that sense weren't there? Without having to do anything or say anything, let yourself imagine the absence of that stuck feeling. What is that like in your body? Try just feeling the stuck sense without trying to change it.

Give yourself the time you need to explore that.

Then, if others are experiencing anxiety, loss or pain, how do you feel about this common human predicament? Can there be some sense of fellowship along with that? What would it be like to be able to help, or even express sympathy for another person who is in a jam?

Establish empathy in regard to people you are in contact with... then to people you know about...to animals...and to the general predicament of being sentient, vulnerable and needing security.



Remember how you were ten years ago: what your interests, aims and preoccupations were. Then what your problems were. Consider that in comparison to where you sense yourself now, not to assess success or failure, but to acknowledge the change. Bearing that in mind, how reliable is it to extend your current state of being into the future? What is it like if you let the future be unknown?

Consider yourself as a child, then in youth, middle age, and old age. Reflect on your inevitable sickness and death. Place your current status and predicament within the breadth of that scope. Sense the mood that arises.



Bring to mind a person who currently occupies your attention, for good or for bad. Imagine them as a child, as older, as sick, as dying. Do this slowly to get either a visual image, or enough of one to evoke an emotional impression. Imagine them wanting or appreciating happiness and human warmth. Imagine them at ease and relaxed, then under pressure. Imagine them being rejected, or abused. Notice the changes in the emotional tones.

Sense yourself in the same way. Then recognize that someone else could do the same process of imagining about you. How would it feel to be seen or sensed in such a full and sympathetic way? How would it feel to be seen out of a role or current state, and as someone more complete?

Notice where and how that sensing occurs. Dwell a little longer in that heart-space of empathy.



Bring to mind something you've done that causes you regret. Or something that your mind hastily dismisses, shrugs off or justifies. Try to get a feel for how or who you were when you acted in that regrettable way – the mind-state, the energy, the views and expectations you had. Witness all of that as occurring to a person unaware of the consequences of these actions. Keep that witnessing non-analytical, but get a sense for the impulsiveness, the fear or anger that were running through your system at that time. How does that feel? Explore the bodily senses and any shifts in energy.

Witness all of this as it happens as energies and moods and even bodily states. Move out of the stories and the judgements and into the shifts and flushes in the here and now.

Acknowledge that these emotions and drives are common to all people. Let this move into forgiveness and compassion.



## Difficulties

A source of difficulty may be in trying to feel empathic, or trying to get some emotions going. This trying will almost certainly block the arising of empathy. Go to the immediate visual, auditory experience of one or two things that you notice around you. Even better, touch things - the grain of wood, the coolness of metal and how that differs from plastic, the textures of cloth. Slowly rub your hands together to get the feel of skin upon skin. Don't try to make anything happen, just take these simple things in and notice whether they feel agreeable, disagreeable, mildly or acutely. These feelings may not be strong, but sensed as a preference to stay with one object, or to move away from it. So linger a while until you get it; that aimless lingering will help the shift to a heart sense. Notice that feeling occurs with no effort, except the care and attention to the specific thing.

There may be a difficulty in getting the emotional feel of various imagined or evoked scenarios. Again, we may feel pressured to come up with a nice compassionate mood and that either falsifies or hinders the arising of the real thing. In this case, take just one instruction, turn it over and give it time: what would it feel like? If no particular feeling occurs, try visualising something or someone very specific: your job, your boss, your mother and so on, in a particular event. You might even try talking to yourself about it, and listening to the mood in your voice. How does that affect you?

You may also assume that you have to have perfect recall, or the ability to visualise in fine detail. Actually all you need is one touch, one evocative image. The exercises are not about chronicling, or even capturing accurate literal truth. Instead we're imagining (almost daydreaming) with a suggested direction, and attending to the emotional traces in the heart.



## **If this form doesn't help you...**

You might try sensing how other people's successes and problems affect you, even if they make you feel angry. How is it they make you feel that way? What in you objects to, resists or is moved by others? Try to feel, rather than think the answer. How can you look after that aspect of yourself which is affected by others?

A way of sensing the heart without a topic is to stand in a quiet place with your eyes closed. Then try to get a sense of the space around you – whether it feels large or small, and whether you feel in direct contact with it or not. Take your time. The sense is not dependent on a single impression (such as a sound or temperature) but on the overall feel of the moment of standing in this space. And yes, it is helpful to focus one's attention on the chest region as if it were a large fingertip sensing the breeze.

What arises may not be that clear as an idea, but will be a 'heart-impression' of the overall sense of being in this place at this time. You can brighten and strengthen it by imagining what it would be like right now to be in the presence of a friend, or to be seen or approached in a friendly way.



## **Further**

Practise offering the heart. This is done in a formal way by making offerings to external images, such as Buddha-images. Set up a shrine with a Buddha bounded on each side with candles and flowers and with a small incense holder in front. If this doesn't suit you, you can use a sacred image, or even just an empty space with a few flowers to define it. The main thing is to use something concrete, gladdening or comforting that you can physically make an offering to.

Offerings are both physical and heartfelt. We generally offer fresh flowers (symbolising ethical purity) and light the candles (symbolising wisdom) and then place a lit stick of incense in the holder. Compose yourself for a few moments in recollection of the sense of the sacred, of the great heart, then offer yourself bodily by bowing to the shrine keeping that sacredness in mind.

You can then offer your voice through chanting a mantra or one of the longer chants and recollections of the Buddhist tradition. At this time you may also feel moved to offer a prayer or aspiration for the welfare of all or any other being.

Finally offer the heart itself with the sense of opening to the sacred, to the Path and the Way. Contemplate that sense of boundless opening.

## Theory: Developing the Mind

*Neither mother nor father nor any other relative can do one greater good than one's own well-directed mind. [Dhp. 43]*

In this part of the book, we'll look more fully into the cultivation of mind, based on the skills developed through the previous instructions. In these, we learned a few things about mindfulness – the ability to bear something in mind – and clear comprehension – the ability to scan, evaluate and get some understanding out of what is being borne in mind. It's a simple and direct cultivation, not a matter of adopting any belief-system or academic learning. Yet out of this practice there is a development of mind that taps into and strengthens our capacity for composure, integrity and kindness. And most important, we gain the strength and the understanding to clear the mind of psychological hindrances.

### **Establishing the mind as witness**

A key form of understanding that develops from meditation is 'insight' (*vipassanā*). It's a direct, rather than intellectual understanding that all mental activities, thoughts and moods, come and go. They fluctuate and pass – they're changeable (*anicca*). This may not seem radical as an idea, but as an experience it shifts how we relate to such phenomena, and even what we sense ourselves as being. When ideas, viewpoints, beliefs and emotions are experienced as transitory and ephemeral, we regard them with greater detachment, and our sense of identity no longer rests on what we think or feel. Mind-stuff seems to happen to me, but it's not who

I am. Also, it's clear that the 'me' that things happen to changes as well. This 'me' can be bright, receptive, sleepy or irritable. It's sensed as 'myself,' but its state is dependent on causes and conditions such as sense-contact, physical health and what the world landed on me an hour or day ago. So neither the flow of mind-stuff, nor the receiver of its impressions, offer any kind of solid identity.

The receiver of mind-stuff is mind-consciousness (*mano-viññāna*), and like any sense-consciousness (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body) it is a stream of sensitivity that registers particular phenomena. In the case of mind-consciousness, these phenomena (*dhamma*) are the thoughts, moods, memories and impulses which arise dependent on sense-contact. Within this stream of mind-consciousness, the centre is mind, 'heart' or awareness (*citta*, pronounced 'chitta'). It can go along with what states are arising, react to them, distract or formulate responses. It experiences the present state of consciousness in terms of agreeable or disagreeable feelings (fear feels unpleasant, love feels pleasant) as well as meanings ('this is threatening,' 'this is food') and comes up with impulses like holding, rejecting or classifying. All this requires careful attention, so mind takes up the central position at any moment in consciousness. And all of this behaviour can be witnessed from the most fundamental base of mind – awareness.

As it is in the central position, mind is experienced as the 'I' in 'I am...(hungry or happy or disappointed).' But it's not an autonomous entity and it doesn't have a lasting state of being. It senses things differently when it's stressed than when it's at ease, and it's liable to come up with a different set of responses. Its activities and creations are also received into mind-consciousness, so there is generally a considerable flux of mind-stuff going on – dependent either directly on seeing and the rest, or upon thoughts and emotions.

We might liken mind-consciousness to a ball that is always rolling and swerving dependent on the changing environment that it is in, with the mind as the part of it that interprets and responds to how it is affected.

To operate properly, mind has to stay connected and not passive. An acrobat riding such a ball has to flex, know when and how to apply more muscle, when to throw out his/her arms to support balance, which way to lean in order to guide the ball in a chosen direction. If he/she fixates on an impression, gets rigid and doesn't flex or spaces out on the scenery, they're going to fall off and the ball will lose its steerage. Therefore there has to be the factor of intention – above all to stay on the ball, and secondly to bear the skilful direction in mind. And the mind also has to be responsively connected not rigidly clamped onto the object. It only operates effectively if it doesn't try to be autonomous. It needs to respond to what's arising in consciousness. It will be further impaired if it doesn't bear a right intention – harmlessness, compassion, non-greed – in mind, and also if it is so fixed in its viewpoints that it can't respond to what is arising in the present. Yet, when it is held as a solid and independent self, that's what happens: the 'self-view' is one that wants to have things 'my way,' and that means its way of relating is always biased. When we need to control, own or shut off the world of people, events (and our own minds) we don't establish a truly responsive relationship. Because of this, 'self-view' is a major cause of imbalance, bias, loneliness – in short, suffering and stress.

On the other hand, if mind and consciousness are not held as an identity, we regard what they bring up with less reactivity – with less fascination and defence. Instead there is more detachment, and that allows the witnessing activity of mind plenty of scope and freedom to respond. Now it's often the case that we move from noticing something to reacting to it very quickly. At other times we're so involved with thoughts and feelings that we lose that witnessing viewpoint, and lose touch with our intentions and ethical sensitivity. If we've lost, or not found, a full and responsive connection to consciousness, it's like we're not really 'on the ball.' The mind topples and gets run over by the contents of consciousness, (that is, thoughts and emotions). Which of course radically affects what we think, say or do. Witnessing, being mindful and aware, is therefore the single most important activity of mind; it's something we do most of the time, but often in a minimal way. This, therefore, is the basis of mind-

development: if you don't really know your own mind, how can you help yourself, let alone anyone else?

As mindfulness and clear comprehension are exercised, this witnessing aspect gets stronger. Mindfulness and clear comprehension open up a space that allows us to respond and engage (or not) with our mind-stuff. Then, because we're not so hooked up with it all, we can choose the kind of attitudes, perspectives and energies that work for our own and others' welfare. This doesn't mean putting a particular set of views or emotions or beliefs at the centre of our life, but rather making witnessing-mind our centre and letting it determine which views, values or responses are best suited to what's happening in the present moment. The blend of spaciousness that comes from non-involvement, and the firmness of bearing something in mind allow a fuller range of emotional and psychological material to be present than if my opinions and self-interest are holding sway. Mindfulness and clear comprehension then allow mind-consciousness to open and reveal where it's hot or tangled or biased, because at the moment of witnessing, the heart isn't acting on those tendencies, nor identifying with them, nor trying to fix them.

### **Connecting to the wise heart**

Witnessing with mindfulness and clear comprehension isn't the same as intellectually knowing. Nor is mind a purely intellectual process – which is why I often refer to it as 'heart.' Mind has an organ, called '*mano*' that functions like the eye – it holds the focal span of attention and in this way registers the presence of thoughts and mental images. Joy, doubt, expectation, irritation and gladness are experienced as phenomena that come and go through its span of attention. However, this attention doesn't feel anything. It gives no sense of context, or of the whole picture or even of how it affects us, so it can't form a useful judgement, doesn't tell us how to relate to experience and can't respond. Attention isn't the same as clear comprehension; it is controlled by whatever aim lies behind it. It can be well-guided, but attention is often steered by random impulses, attractions and fears without knowing what those impulses are. It can neither give us the encouragement to bear with the difficulties, nor the



initiative to investigate assumptions as true or false, nor the dispassion to look at pleasures or pains from the perspectives of value or purpose.

Now take the case of a man wielding an axe – you can watch him poised over a pile of wood, or brandishing it over your mother’s head. Watching, as an act of attention, is equal, unbiased and free of analysis. But is this a good thing? The kind of witnessing that is most useful is that which refers an event to the sense of meaning, intention and feeling – in other words to the mind’s responsive base, *citta*, or ‘heart.’ This is mindfulness: it connects the witnessing to that aspect of mind where interpretation and meaning occur, and which comes up with a response. It bears in mind; it holds something in the heart.

When there is this connection to the heart, clear comprehension is supported by an ethical sense and wholesome intent of the heart. So from a balanced and clear heart, qualities such as compassion, courage, patience and equanimity develop as responses to what is arising. In other words, with mindfulness, the heart doesn’t just disengage, it learns how to engage in a full and clear way. It is because this witnessing is not just bare and inert that there is development of mind.

Mindfulness is an initiator of the process of Awakening, but is not enough on its own. It puts us in a position where we can learn from the experience of riding the ball. Then we have to develop learning capacity, strength, determination and other qualities to clear hindrances and steward the mind. So through this witnessing of our own particular, conscious process, the mind develops in terms of ‘factors of Awakening.’ These factors are: mindfulness, investigation of qualities, vigour, rapture, tranquility, concentration and equanimity. They all issue from the heart with its aspiration, its enquiry and determination, as well as from a growing access to our potential for gladness, ease, stillness and spaciousness. These flowerings of the Awakening process are initiated by mindfulness because it connects directly to the heart, rather than through some complicated notion of myself and what I should be.

## Working with ‘Activities’

The way that the heart reads consciousness is in terms of its activities or ‘formations’ (*sankhāra*). What the English language variously phrases as ‘feeling’ jealous, ‘being’ optimistic or ‘constructing’ a line of enquiry are all mental/emotional *sankhāra*; they’re activated, and they activate the sense of a subject; they form a ‘me’ – as in ‘these things are happening to me.’ Normally the heart attempts to integrate its current experience by the activity of referring it to what it has learned previously – it refers to my values, meanings and preferences. This is the activity called ‘**designation contact**’ (*adhivacana-phassa*). It seems reliable, but it’s biased by self-interest. And when the values and preferences are attuned to preserving and maintaining my being right, or approved of, or in the same old pattern of anxiety that I’ve been in for ten years, because it’s now so familiar that it feels like me...then that activity inhibits development. If we’re not prepared to let go of who we’ve been, reassess our assumptions and revise our strategies – past habits aren’t questioned, and the mental activities go down the well-worn track of ‘who I am’ and ‘what I never will be.’ What occurs instead is a solidification of particular activities into a formation – as ‘this is true, this is how I am, this is all I can be.’ And it’s particularly tragic when the need to be solid makes us adopt activities like inadequacy or irritability as ‘this is who I am.’

Because many habits are rooted in uncertainty, anxiety, disappointment and loss, it’s not easy to calm and unravel them – which are the activities you have to undertake to clear them. What is needed then are wholesome intentions such as kindness and/or patience, and skilful attention such as mindfulness. **Intention** (*cetana*) is another form of activity, and when our sustained intention is one of calming and clarifying, it helps the mind to stand back from its habitual formations. You might for example extend a steady and empathic intention to witness, rather than act upon, the familiar urge to blow up when something doesn’t go your way. You don’t act on it, but neither do you repress it. Instead, intentions to be mindful and investigate help us to look into how these activities happen; and calm helps us to break through the reactivity.

The way it may normally go is that someone or something ‘pushes my buttons’ and I react for good or bad. That’s an activity, a *sankhāra*. It carries an intention, a potential for action, with an ethical flavour. It feels like me, but because it’s familiar and I can witness it, I can know that it’s a program, the contactformation of ‘happening to me.’ There’s a well-used ‘I always have to do all the work around here’ program. There’s a particular program around impressions of inadequacy or even of spiritual development: ‘I need more space, I can’t do this.’ So some of these activities are good and some are a problem, and we need to find out which ones work for our welfare and encourage those. The teaching is that if we can do that, defective and disabling programs can be dismantled or altered. This isn’t done, and can’t be done, from some idea of my self and what I should be (which in itself is a program), but through the factors of Awakening. They do the work of witnessing and relaxing or straightening out our programs, because they connect to the heart, and will therefore align to what is most easeful, balanced and consistent. The truth of the Dhamma is that what is most easeful, balanced and consistent is in fact the suspending of all activities, into unconditioned freedom or Nibbāna – but that happens in accordance with Dhamma, not from some self-view.

**Attention** (*manasikāra*), the creator of a focus, is another activity. It too gets habituated into programs of how I see things and what interests me. Often we have a habitual way of regarding ourselves – as a loner, a genius or as someone who has to...Seeing past the focus that our habitual self-image provides is the first solid vantage point of Dhamma practice, because this habit will always dominate what we attend to and how we attend; and consequently what we fill our minds with. So the ‘Awakening view’ is to deepen attention, to notice the tendencies that affect our mental activities, and through mindful awareness calm, restrain and eventually disband them. The first step is to let these tendencies come to light.

We may for example experience frustrated wishes, jealousy or fear – all fairly common traits that we may act upon as children. But as adults we’re supposed to be beyond them, even though we may not have developed

what it takes to bring around that maturity. When we're not supposed to have a program and it gets denied, or when it hasn't yet become conscious – it resides as a latent tendency. We all have these: we may for example not feel violent all the time, but all of us have the latent tendency to experience a violent impulse, which only gets limited and finally relinquished by a profound maturation of heart. In the light of the factors of Awakening, that nerve and trigger gets less sensitive and finally isn't triggered. However, as long as a violent impulse is experienced from an unknowing, shadow place, our heart can't handle it, and will never learn how. Instead we might deny that we have these tendencies, or dress them up: you know – violence becomes 'a just response to the enemy' and so on.

So Awakening is about allowing latent tendencies to become conscious – in order to transcend them. In other words, you don't have to be perfect in terms of what comes up in the mind, but you can do yourself a lot of good by handling it more skilfully. This isn't always a comfortable process.

Generally, the development of mindfulness and clear comprehension will reveal residual tendencies towards anxiety, greed and aversion and even self-annihilation. So the work of clearing, of investigating, letting go and firming the heart in stillness, has to be accompanied by kindness as well as understanding. If you sustain an intent of in-depth kindness that really helps allay negativity and judgemental attitudes about yourself and others. And there are further developments: as long as the heart-connection of mindfulness is retained, you get more clear, courageous and joyful. Then self-confidence and determination will arise. With this kind of backing, mindfulness can witness the evocative *sankhāra* of our personal history without adding reactions, affirmations, denials and the rest of it. In this way mind's energy isn't dissipated, and the witness strengthens in concentration and the ease that provides.

The factor of investigation, when carried through with mindfulness and deepened in concentration, penetrates the fundamental source of the activities that cause us suffering and stress. This source is: 'ignorance',

meaning ‘obscured’ or ‘missing the point.’ What it refers to are assumptions that throw the mind out of balance: the assumption that we have or can have things, that we can be some lasting state, or that we can find a state which will protect us from what we don’t want. A lot of this is unconscious. But based on these assumptions are the confused activities of acquisition, jealousy, struggle, defensiveness, denial, frustration, blaming, losing and despair. Good to get free of, don’t you think? However, when you want to regain balance, it’s important not to get impatient and forceful. Don’t get fazed by the smoke and clatter of these activities. Instead, get the witness to dive deeper to clear the distorted viewpoints upon which they’re founded.

### **Perception or ‘felt meaning’**

These viewpoints occur in another function of consciousness, the act of perception. A primary program in consciousness is, by means of contact, to acquire perceptions (*saññā*), that is, impressions and interpretations both of what a thing is and what it means to me. It’s a two-stage process. First there’s the immediate sense of what something is: a black and white thing with legs is understood to be a cow rather than a zebra, for example. It’s not always accurate (it could be a bad model of a zebra), but perception is that recognition that initiates the arising of the thought ‘cow.’ Along with that recognition comes the second stage, which is what that thing ‘means’ to me: a cow as a loveable creature, or something to be milked or a future hamburger. If I were gored once by a crazy cow, there would probably be a ripple of fear in that perception. This is the area of felt meaning. This mental/emotional aspect of perception can carry a huge charge when it comes to perceptions of other people – whom I might perceive as friendly, frightening, sexually interesting; or as superior, inferior; or as trustworthy or suspicious. This is natural, because our happiness, employment or partnership possibilities all hinge on other people and how we assess them. However, we don’t always get this right. We misinterpret, or get let down by others, or may have assumed that someone is trustworthy or intelligent based upon the clothes they wear, or their accent. So the area of perception needs to be understood and clarified of prejudice, because perceptions trigger how I will act, for good or for bad.

A foundation for that process is to train perception through mindfulness of the body. That is, we attend to the perceptions of the body that derive directly from the body. Normally we might refer to the body as old or young, big or small, beautiful or ugly – but these are perceptions based on the visual experience of the body, not on the elemental senses – such as solidity, warmth and movement – that the body experiences in itself. And for bodily well-being we need to attend to the body in itself. In this respect, all bodies are composed of the same stuff going through the same process. A beauty queen (or an athlete) of two decades ago is no longer number one, but they're still experiencing solidity, warmth and movement. There's no gain or loss or competition in that. So if we attend to the body in its own terms, agitation around whose body is bigger and better or more or less attractive in the eyes of others doesn't have to take hold. And when the mind relaxes from its fixation with perception, it's a lot more spacious and easeful.

As this well-being becomes available, it allows us a viewpoint from which we can see that all the judgements and anxieties that we put onto our own or other people's bodies are unnecessary sources of stress. So we start to let go of the hunger, the distaste and the confusion that biases the mind – because these are stressful. Letting go puts us at ease, and restores the proper balance to the mind. Compassion and steadiness come readily to such a mind. So once you get a feel for the alternatives, know you have a choice and are able to make a good choice, then letting go supports a whole realignment of personal value and meaning.

Just as there can be a steady shift whereby witnessing rather than a set of strategies or beliefs occupies the central heart position, so the sense of release can come to occupy the central meaning in one's life. As we acknowledge and let go of the fear, desire, or aversion that distort perception, that taste of clarity and release gives a realization of a happiness and inner balance that doesn't depend on having things, or being in any particular state.

## Handling mind-states and emotions

A process that brings around such radical realignments stirs up, or reveals, a lot of emotional material. Emotions accompany the heart and form a rich aspect of what it is to be alive. So we're not trying to get rid of emotions, so much as hold them wisely to allow them to find a healthy form, rather than a conflicted or neurotic one.

Emotions are mixes of 'felt meanings' and activities. Witnessing them is helped by the simple fact that the body 'resonates' with the moods and impulses that run through it. (When we're angry, we tense up and the heartbeat changes; when we're loving and joyful, the body feels vibrant; and so on.) This resonance gives us a way of addressing the heart by addressing the bodily effect, of steadying or relaxing the emotion by grounding attention in the body and simply breathing. So this gives us a handle on emotions and mind-states (like anxiety, or righteousness or despair) that can otherwise bowl us over. Referring to the bodily sense is valuable, because the body can't fake or mask the feeling. And furthermore, through widening, easing and finding balance in the bodily sense, we turn on a sympathetic system that can bring the heart into true. This goes a lot deeper and works more effectively than the process of 'me trying to sort my self out' – an approach that leads to complexity, righteousness, force, defence and denial.

In this process, one uses the skills of *mano*, which are of object-definition, to clearly discern what is going on in the swings and nuances of the affective mind. This mind-organ can be a good secretary because it isn't affected. It can notice that phenomena pass, and so relieve the heart from acting on them. And the heart can direct its secretary to attend to a bodily feeling, to focus on a thought, or to dwell on memories or images that give rise to kindness or compassion in order to establish a skilful foothold on the conscious process. So meditation is not just a matter of noting that one is feeling or thinking and going back to the breath. We do need to use intelligence to measure whether a mood is worth attending to, and if so, how. To notice where one's sense of regret or inspiration comes from is

wise reflection, an interplay between the thought-faculty and the heart. Through such reflection, we come to the significant realization that the activities that give us the greatest blessings are those which are also for the welfare of others, that attitudes of kindness and compassion will be for our mutual benefit. In this way, through penetrating and purifying mental activity, we lessen our sense of isolation, a sense in which opinionatedness and personal bias can easily take hold.

It's always good to remember that the mind can be developed in many good ways. What are presented here are the most direct ways – those that use mind, consciousness and body, in and by themselves. This in itself is a tremendous affirmation of the potential that we all have as human beings. If we didn't have this potential for Awakening and mental/emotional healing, forgiveness and compassion would be impossible. Liberation entails working with and through all that you feel you are, and every step of the way bears fruit in terms of fulfilment and an emptying out of stale residues.

See **Working with Mind-states and Emotions** below for more on this theme.



## Theory: Elements

*...develop meditation that is like the earth; for when you develop meditation that is like the earth, agreeable or disagreeable contact that arises will not invade and take over your mind. [M.62.13]*

### What and why

When we refer to ‘elements’ (*dhātu*) in Buddhist meditation, what is meant are the modes through which we experience any form – in terms of its solidity, mobility, warmth and plasticity. Unlike the English word, ‘element’ doesn’t imply anything solid – for example in one analysis, consciousness is an element. Hence, we can also use the word ‘property.’ What it refers to is a particular behaviour – fire’s property is to be fiery, to bind to an inflammable and consume it. That’s what makes fire what it is.

The practice of contemplating the elements exercises the mind’s ability to shift its habitual ways of perceiving form, in particular bodily form. For example, we may find the shape of a person’s body attractive or unattractive without recognizing that shape in and of itself is neither – it’s compounded out of solidity (earth element) and plasticity (water element). As these elements change, their current disposition isn’t a final truth.

What shape is a candle flame when the wind blows? What shape is an ice cube on a summer’s day? Even when the shape remains constant for a few years, its ‘meaning’ changes. The apparently sleek design of this year’s

car will look outdated in two years' time, become antiquated in five years, and a classic in ten.

When we contemplate form in terms of changeable elements, excitement or disgust don't get aroused. The form of a thing is just what it is right now; it's a phase in the process of changeable elements – we can't own it. We can't stop our bodies changing; in fact the body is not really ours. There's a lot of passion and pain when we do take the shape, size and vitality of the body personally, so coming to terms with it as a form that belongs to nature is a way of clearing out a source of suffering and stress. Seeing form in terms of elements helps us do that.

The elements are a direct perception of the body. They become apparent when we sit still and ask ourselves: 'Right now, how do I know that I have a body?' There will be a sense of solidity, and we can also easily discern the movement of breathing, and the body's warmth and vitality, strong or subdued. More subtly, there is the sense of all these movements and pressures belong to the same thing. They flow in relationship: the tingling belongs to the solid matter; the breathing passes through a solid form and affects it. All these are the 'elements' – the solid is 'earth'; the moving is 'air'; the warmth or vitality is 'fire': and the cohesive, the sense of everything being bound together, is 'water.' Water is the element that provides shape.

You can see these elements in everything from cars to trees to stars and clouds. However, the most significant experience of these elements is in our own bodies and their energies. '**Earth**,' the firmness and mass and ability to resist pressure, becomes apparent in the body through attuning to the skeletal structure, or to the soles of the feet when standing or walking. It awakens the sense of having ground, of being grounded, and will eventually settle into a firm supportive energy in the diaphragm. It gives the sense of resistance – holding against the pressure of something other.

**Air** is wind, movement, changeability and the ability to exert pressure. You can attune to it through the contemplation of breathing. Its natural base is the chest. Air is that sense of pressure being exerted, however subtly, as in the expansion of the abdominal and chest cavities and the distension of the nostrils. It is also the sense of 'brushing' within the nostrils and throat with the in- and out-breath. We might also note it as the movement of the body and the shift of internal and external pressures in walking. When it is absent, there is a sense of rigidity – a negative aspect of 'earth.'

**Fire** is warmth, light and vitality. It is detected in the warmth of the body. In its absence we feel cold and dull. Fire is also desire, the impulsive and the adhesive: that which moves towards catching, connecting and clinging. It is associated with sexual, intellectual or aspiration energies – all of which have the impulse to 'get it.' Whereas water is the cohesive sense of being held, fire is the adhesive sense of reaching out to hold. It centres behind the forehead and eyes and can be sensed as luminosity and motivation; we get stagnant without it.

**Water** represents the degree of wetness, cohesiveness and flow – and the ability to be supple and shapeable. It is most obviously discernible as moisture in the mouth, and sweat through the skin. It also refers to suppleness as in the easy softness of the lower abdomen. Water as the cohesive sense reminds us of being held together, as for example being wrapped in skin, a sense that may have the negative connotations of constriction. It can also be felt as the flushes and flows of subtle sensation through the body. Being cohesive and flowing, water brings up the experience of rhythm and pattern – sensations that flow in a discernible form. We might detect this comfortably in the rhythms of breathing, or in the repetitive swinging of the hips and shoulders when we walk. As water binds things together, it counteracts the more explosive energies of fire. One way of balancing overcharged energy for example is to imagine sitting within a stream of descending water. It can be a force of harmony.

There is also a fifth element – that of **space** – which is an ‘inferred’ element, in that it is detected as the absence of the other four. This absence may be sensed as a space (such as the open space of the sky, or of the throat) or as an alleviation in the intensity of an element, as is experienced when we come out of a densely crowded place. Most important, space allows release from, and recognition of, the other elements. So it’s a good element to have access to, as it will support a more spacious attitude and give us an overview.

Body and mind are closely related in terms of energies: when we’re stressed, we feel bodily tension; when we’re happy we feel bodily brightness. The energies that produce these states are bound up with the three forms of activities – bodily, mental/emotional and verbal. Simply speaking, what the mind feels, the body feels in terms of energies. And where the mind is stuck, the body also feels stuck, numb or reactive. The area of bodily experience where we sense overall impressions such as feeling balanced, healthy, vital or sick is called the ‘somatic’ sense. It gives signals that are translated into emotions of contentment, nurture, vitality, rage, panic and fear, as well as subtler senses of feeling calm or open. Psychological shock will have a somatic effect, which may become locked into the body. Emotional warmth or empathy, on the other hand, supports the release of these effects.

Our life situation may also result in degrees of persistent tension, which can be experienced as a ‘blocked’ absence of feeling, or a sense of being compressed or contracted. This kind of tension may not be evident because it is a chronic residual tension out of which more acute tensions arise. When they die down, and we go from being 95% tense to being only 50% tense, we feel pretty relaxed! But the signs of this residual tension are either a general inability to feel, whereby we can’t sense subtler aspects of the body (such as the full rhythm of breathing), or a state of feeling on edge, unable to settle into the body.

Some parts of the body may also be unconsciously gripped by reactions of anger or fear that have become frozen into its somatic sense – so they feel compacted or highly sensitive for no apparent reason. When there

are blocks caused by frustration, guilt and rage, they may register in the somatic sense as tightness, or numbness. Ordinarily we may not know this, because our attention avoids these areas. However, in meditation we check in with the present disposition of the body, part by part, and the somatic sense provides an indicator of experiences that we may have dismissed. If a felt experience isn't somehow cleared or responded to, it leaves traces in the entire system.

Clearing the experience requires the space to allow it to pass, but this space gets lost if the experience itself is marked as 'wrong' or feels unsafe to allow into awareness. Thought and speech aren't always capable of comprehending or coming to terms with what is going on, and there are also social restrictions on talking about and expressing intense moods like anger or grief. In such a case a layer of guilt or shame gets added and the pattern is buried rather than cleared. Therefore, accessing the somatic impression in the body is a way of meeting and clearing these residues, by translating their felt sense into elemental terms such as hard, fiery, and so on. This curtails spinning out into agitation and proliferation, and allows the feelings to be felt, ventilated and pass.

Afflictions are not all there is! When we notice feeling 'really solid' or 'bright and radiant' or 'light and breezy' or 'flowing,' witnessing our emotions in terms of changing elements checks the reactions and the proliferation of thoughts and emotions. Sometimes that's all that's needed, and at other times when we find ourselves becoming rigid or hot-headed or spun-out and blown away, we might need to bring a balancing element to mind – earth to give us firm ground, water to soften and empathize or space to quell the reactivity. This allows us to experience difficult emotions in a way that doesn't suppress them, but remains empathic and spacious.

## Clearing the Body: the Elements

Contemplating bodily experience in these terms brings around personal well-being through sharpening attention, turning inwards and balancing the bodily energies. Instead of reacting to or even interpreting pressures, flushes and heated energies in the body, we can tune into them as they are and learn to ease, steady or balance them. In this meditation then we can begin to fully participate in the life of our own body to bring around some wholeness and healing.

Explore what makes the body feel present for you. While sitting, close your eyes and put aside the visual map of the body or notions about its appearance. Without all that, how do you know you have a body? Fully receive and attune to the sensations, energies and feelings that constitute your 'body-impression.' How would you define it in its own terms...? A certain pressure here...a certain repeated movement here...a tingling and pulsing here... something warm or cool here. This feels hard; this feels heavy; this feels supple; and so on.

Notice these elemental experiences: weight, solidity or 'earth'; movement and pressures – air; heat, cold, vitality – fire; moisture and suppleness – water; openness – space. Establish a kind of dialogue – between sensing textures and behaviours that indicate the presence of your body and checking what concept fits them, using the language of the five elements.

As you practise, you may locate subtler aspects of the elements: the sense of this arm being connected to the shoulder is cohesion, as is the flow of energy from the palm to the fingers. The feeling of inertia, of having gravity, is earth. The sense of fullness in the belly is the pressure of air.

Spend time resting your attention in these elements in an open and peaceful way: the weightiness of weight is not good or bad – it's just like this.

As you sit, stand, walk or recline, notice the interweaving of these elements: when any sensation or energy arises, what is its initial impression, even before it is pleasant or unpleasant? It might feel like burning, or perhaps you pick up on the pulse of it. Or you might get the impression of a large mass (earth), or of something more diffusive: say, the tingling in the hand ebbing up the wrist and subsiding in the arm like an incoming tide (water). As an element comes to the fore, be aware of how its quality affects attitude and mood.

Go to the sensed periphery of your body. What is outside of that? You might open your eyes in an oceanic gaze, attuning to the sense of space, of openness rather than any specific object. Acknowledge, in a bodily sense, the space around you; let the body sense and relax into that.

Whenever any tightness or sudden movements occur in the body, or when entering a numb patch, practise generating space around that. Also develop spaciousness as a mental attitude: be spacious, don't resist or hold on to any impressions. Lessen any reactivity by stepping back from impressions if need be. (If you find yourself reacting or catching hold, deliberately shift your attention elsewhere.) To be spacious and yet focused might mean imagining what the tightness would look or feel like. Rather than resisting, reacting, trying to fix it or understand it, give it psychological space.

As you spread awareness around that impression, attend deeply without any other motive than to be present and empathic. Amplify that intention with suggestions like, 'All the time in the world to find a place to be with this...' Widen your focus around the tightness, agitation or numbness. Then smooth attention from the centre out to the periphery of the area. Attuning to air, steadily and repeatedly breathe through the area and out into the space. Allow mind-states and moods to unfold and flow.

Over the course of a few minutes you may sense your bodily impression shift to a more comfortable enlarged or settled mode.

When you feel balanced and relaxed, get a good sense of how that feels. There will be a general sense of how the body manifests – it may seem lighter with a less sharply defined periphery for example. It may seem more alive and tingling. Notice also the overall mood, tone and energy of the mind – the thought processes may be more even or subdued.



It may be that there are still disturbances; if so, you can take the practice further.

In the first step, acknowledge the imbalance in elemental terms: say there is too much pressure. If it is an active pressure, as of some force or energy being engaged, this is air. Then attune to a helpful manifestation of air, such as the swelling and subsiding of the chest or abdomen. Bring that air to bear on the negative air; allow the two senses to meet each other. They will start to overlap and even merge in places. Keep spreading your awareness over the two streams until they come into harmony.

If this doesn't bring around balance, the second step is to try an element that is a counterpart to the elemental sense of the difficulty. In the above example, air is a counterpart to earth. But if the pressure were more a passive one, such as being constricted, we would acknowledge that as water and look for the vital element: 'fire.' This may be found in the tingling of the palms or in the vital warm core within the body. Or imagine the warmth as outside, such as the sun or fire playing on the face or chest. Let things loosen up under these influences.

When you find a sense of balance, allow attention to amplify it. Then gradually, by widening and sweeping attention, draw that sense over the entire body, connecting it to the ground beneath and the space around you. In time this may produce an image that you can dwell upon for firmer concentration.



When you have worked around your body, discerning elements and bringing them into balance, let go and contemplate elements as they arise and pass. Contemplate how they affect the perception of the body.

Acknowledge that none of this is solid or lasting. Dwell in the awareness that sees that.



## **Difficulties**

It may be that your mind needs support to pick up these elements in a full way. In this case, take your time and imagine the meaning of ‘firm, rigid; or flowing, wishy-washy; then bright, fiery; and agile, restless; and spacious, empty’. Are there any body-impressions, even temporary, that line up with those senses?

Work around simple impressions, like the weight of the skull, the bones in the hands, or the pressure of the seat on the ground. Water is the most difficult to detect, so leave that until you get more adept.

With evaluation, and when attuning to any body energy, energies get released that may be unsettling. So work slowly and gently, and avoid analysis or deductions.



## **If this form doesn't help you...**

Try to recognize how you know the quality of everyday things: your ability to pick up a plum and know how ripe it is by its degree of firmness – earth element. We can calibrate these elements very clearly when we go to buy or choose something. Maybe you're checking out some ornaments and on picking something up you know it's plastic not brass, because it's doesn't have the weight (earth) or coolness (fire) of metal.

Try contemplating form in these ways: the shape of your own or someone else's form as a form in nature, like a tree, a rock or a cloud. There can be agreeable or disagreeable feelings around these shapes, but the shapes don't have to be equated as essentially belonging to anyone or anything...a cloud, a stream, a candle flame – shape is the dance performed by the water element.



## **Further**

### Elemental Regions

The natural centres of earth, fire, water, air and space are respectively: the midriff/solar plexus region; the middle of the forehead, above the nose and between the eyes; the lower abdomen; the chest; and the throat. Placing your attention in any one of these areas might again help you to get a fuller impression of an element in a somatic rather than anatomical sense.

### Elemental Breathing

You can also contemplate breathing in elemental terms. The breath can then spread that impression and energy over the entire body. For example, the repeated rhythmic flow of the breathing process can be sensed as 'water.' If we then attune to that particular sign and enlarge it in the mind, the body can be experienced as something supple, and the mind feels flexible.

In a similar way, you may sense the breath-energy becoming more like light, the fire element. Then, as you scan the body-impressions you may notice that some parts of your body feel cold or numb. Breathe the fire element through the body for warmth and brightness. The earth at the end of the out-breath may help to ground an unsteady mind. And the breath as air keeps everything momentary and light.

## Elements and Pain

We can also work with the tightening or contracting sensations around physical pain. In this case, acknowledge the aches and pains in elemental terms: like a rock, like fire. That in itself may cool out the hard reactions to the pain and make it seem less aggressive. Create some space around the pain and then try flowing a diffusive and cool awareness through it by means of the fluid, watery quality of the breath.

## **Process: Working with Mind-states and Emotions**

*Just as rain doesn't break through a well-thatched house, so passion never penetrates a well-developed mind. [Dhp. 14]*

The meditation theme that provides the opportunity for the most long-term development (as well as challenges) is that of revealing and resolving mind-states. We've already worked on it in terms of dealing with hindrances and cultivating the sublime states, and as the ground of practice becomes more established, it is to the stream of moods and emotions that we return. And we return with an understanding that these states, however troublesome, have a lot of energy and a sensitivity that we don't want to annihilate. Which is just as well, because that stream of emotional energy will always be with us. And it can be checked, handled, opened and transmuted into a refined form of heart-intelligence.

What are generally referred to as mind-states are more usefully understandable as 'heart-states.' Anger, motivation, affection, jealousy: they're a mixed bag. They are strongly emotive, impulsive and at times resistant to reasoned guidance. Although the positive ones are a resource for what is good about human aspiration, the negative ones are a major source of misery. And even the good ones flood the mind with the urge to do, which doesn't allow us to deepen into the rested awareness that is the supreme peace and fullness of the human mind.

Whether they're positive or negative, what we call an emotion is a compound of three factors. These are: firstly, a mental perception or felt meaning; secondly, a feeling (the sense of agreeable, disagreeable or

neutral); and finally, an activity in terms of an impulse, or reaction – a surge, jump or flush. The ways of handling the emotion are based upon addressing one or another of these factors in isolation from the compounded mix in which they rise up and take hold. This takes mindfulness and investigation, the first two of the seven factors of Awakening. These provide us with a way of addressing the ‘heart-state’ without acting upon it, or suppressing it, approving or disapproving of it. The first two factors open and steady the heart; then the subsequent factors of persistence, rapture, tranquillity, unification and equanimity merge its energies into the base of awareness.

The way in which we generally apply the first two Awakening factors entails separating the activity from the felt meaning that triggers it. Take the case when I feel insulted: when these factors are established, I can contemplate that felt meaning as distinct from the impulse to retort, go into a ‘wounded me’ program or store up the insult as the foundation for a grudge. Or at least I can try to relax any of those activities; or wait for them to subside. (This is not easy work.) And how do I do that? First I check the effect, the flush that rises up at the moment of recognising the insult. I may do this by coming into my bodily sense and feeling that impulse-energy rushing through my system, gripping my chest and flushing my face, and holding it mindfully as ‘bodily activity.’ Then maybe in that second or two, I check my breathing and let it go through some gentle full out-breaths, breathing through that energy in the body.

Well, if I’ve got this far without retorting or suppressing, congratulations! And with that sense of self-respect, some assurance arises and I realize I don’t have to drop to the level of snapping back. And, I don’t have to pick up the insult as anything to do with me. As the Buddha himself remarked, if someone offers you something and you don’t pick it up, then the offering stays with the donor, which is a non-judgemental way of handing it back.

It may subsequently be appropriate for me to respond by asking what the other person is feeling, or pointing out the effect that their comments can

have for themselves as well as others. Then again, I may in due course investigate the negative perception that the other person has thrown at me, and how I'm affected by a remark about my physical appearance or behaviour. (Most perceptions have some truth in them.) Can I look again at my behaviour – or is the truth of the matter mostly about the other person's attitude? Then, without necessarily deciding, if I just hold the sense, the felt meaning of dissonance, of conflict, of hurt and reactivity, independent of the personalities – compassion arises. So the felt meaning doesn't have to be translated into a final truth as to who is the innocent and who is the guilty party; instead it is held as an expression of that heart-sensitivity itself. And when we don't create good guys and bad guys, crime and punishment and blame, our awareness deepens into a melting sensitivity. There it can widen with the recognition of our common humanity and come to rest.

This is a way in which a mind-state 'empties' into a sensitive inner peace; it's not a matter of eradicating an emotion but of holding it, respectfully receiving it and letting its *sankhāra* transmute. When you get to experience that, you find two further developments become available. First, you get the encouragement to unlock certain buried or frozen emotional states, states which don't manifest except as an absence of ease or confidence or trust in others. This 'frozen' syndrome may be due to suppression of emotions that were taboo or not allowed – such as grief or fear or rage. It's also the case that some tendencies may be deeply embedded because the felt-meaning carries such a powerful trigger that it's very difficult to disconnect it from the reaction. Something like depression or resentment may have become so built in to how I sense myself that it's really stuck. Following a blind reflex, the mind even gathers around negative programs in order to establish a familiar sense of self. In some cases this is the area for help from a therapist. But it's also possible for us to work on ourselves, on our embedded neuroses, passions and pains with the understanding that these can open into expressions of a heart-sensitivity that is our human gift.

The second further development is to transcend more 'positive' states of excitement and attachment.

We start to grow out of attachment to pleasure and success when we sense there is a happiness that is steadier and doesn't need feeding. And the process is much the same as outlined above: to check the activity and to investigate the perception. Is my happy feeling over dinner or a promotion (or whatever) satisfying? And after a while, doesn't it take me away from being present and content with myself, and limit my feelings of compassion and concern for others? Reflecting like this is a way of placing even one's creature comforts and pleasures into the focus of enquiry – and why not? The exercises outlined in **Deep Attention and Investigation** may be useful in this area.

When all else fails (as will happen from time to time), the essential first step is to stop the train of thoughts that a mind-state produces. An undeveloped heart can't handle the triggers of rage or depression or obsessive lust. So when you find yourself getting locked into anger, jealousy or craving, then it's time to get more proactive. When your child is wandering into the road, do you suggest she/he contemplate the traffic or become more aware of their feelings? There is a time to just grab the mind and haul it out of the traffic. If you're heading into overwhelm, come back to the body, stand up, open your eyes, walk up and down. This is parenting the heart – with patience and compassion, of course.

And last, although we may feel stuck in mindsets like depression or anxiety, this doesn't have to be the case. It's also possible to deliberately induce and sustain mind-states that are clarifying and supportive. This is through bringing to mind and sustaining helpful recollections. This is a basic practice that can be developed as an introduction to any meditation period, or used for reflection at any time of day. Examples of some of these are in the following **Recollections**.

## Recollections

### Recollection of mortality

Recollection and reflection on mortality, one's own and that of any other person, helps to prune the tangle that emotions can get into. It helps us to sieve out what is really important from what is superficial. As a daily practice it's recommended that one consider the inevitability and unpredictability of one's own death. This means bringing to mind the idea of dying and witnessing what happens in the heart. There may be a resistance to even considering the topic; there may be fear and confusion. So notice that, feel that in your body and breathe through that. When things settle, try introducing the topic again; as one arrives at emotional acceptance, there is a sense of dispassion. This allows for a careful review of what you're doing with your life in the present, and of what you're carrying in your heart.

In the light of death and vulnerability, feeling jealous about someone else's new suit or home in the sun loses its drive. And why bother hanging onto grudges if you might die tonight? However, this also means that if there's something that is important to you, then check it out, contemplate why it feels precious. You may then explore that sense through the lens of one of the following reflections. And as these practices make the meaning more clear, you can then look at ways to prioritise living it out.





## **Recollection of kamma**

Consider that every mind-state that rises up is a caused and temporary thing, set going by causes and conditions. It's not some permanent identity and is not triggered by a personal aim, but by what people say, by the way one assumes things to be, by getting or not getting what we want, by sickness, health and circumstances – in brief by causes and conditions. In itself then, it's not a person or a personal possession. However, it does leave results – pleasant or painful. We do have to experience these. If such feelings and mind-states are taken personally they will trigger off more mind-states – to get more, to make things different and so on. So you get the result of agitation, desire or aversion, and identification with all this. That's how kamma works.

Another point is that how we see and relate to each other is through our mental perceptions and responses – good or bad. When we reflect on kamma, we know there's a lot of it, and it directs our minds. Therefore, for our own welfare and that of others, it's vital to be able to check the mind and steer it towards generating good kamma, such as patience, sense-moderation, truthfulness and nonviolence. There's a good chance that with some empathy and mutual respect, my kammically produced mind-state and yours will be able to get on with each other, cooperate and learn a few things. Without generating good kamma, it's not a sure thing at all. All the conflict that humans have with each other throughout the world comes down to not practising in line with this.



## **Recollection of Buddha, or the sacred**

Imagine or use a photograph or other image to bring to mind the impression of someone you trust deeply. If you can't think of anyone in particular, imagine what it would be like to be trusted, or received with warmth. Do this slowly, by coming out of your head and into your body: imagine for example the feeling of sitting in warm water, or warm light or a safe and happy place. Notice then, and let your body sense, the

absence of difficulties – the absence of threat, or of pressure or of being in a hurry. Do this slowly and repeatedly because, although we're often acutely aware of what's wrong, we generally don't notice what's unproblematic. Let your body-mind dwell in what that 'no problem' place feels like – whether there is a sense of relief or of slowing down or of buoyancy; whether you feel more spacious; whether your breath-rhythm changes and so on.

Take a heart 'photograph' of that state and dwell in it. How would you describe that impression: is it of something large or small, hard or soft, mobile or static? How would you describe it in terms of elements? Could you say whether it is light or dark, or even give it a colour? How does it make you feel? When you have a good fix on this feeling, contemplate and rest your attention in it. This is your own image of the sacred, your personal Buddha. Go to it frequently with love and respect. Then it will give its vitality to the awareness of whatever currents rise up in the heart – and will let those currents pass through. (See also **Great Heart**.)

## Process: Deep Attention and Investigation

*...There are, bhikkhus, wholesome and unwholesome states, blameable and blameless states, inferior and superior states, dark and bright states with their counterparts: frequently giving deep attention to them nourishes the arising of...and fulfils by developing, the enlightenment factor of investigation of states. [S 46.51]*

Moods and mind-states tell us how we're feeling and form the basis of how we respond. I'm feeling positive, so I have an optimistic or positive mindset. This mindset gives rise to an overall sense of who I am – inferior, or well liked. However, this mindset and the states that support it do shift, so my apparent position and identity goes up and down. In meditation we learn to review and address mind-states and feelings as they are, without making them into an identity, or trying to be an identity that has a steady mind-state or doesn't have negative feelings. To contemplate moods and attitudes as they are is important because if we take their messages of how I am and turn them into who I am, or blindly act upon or repress them, these mind-states become fixed as aspects of me. From this self-view we may even earnestly want to change who we are...but wanting alone just doesn't work. Then the frustration of not being able to change makes the fixed sense even more solid. In some cases, the fixedness is so stuck that we give up on ourselves; then the state dips below the horizon of awareness and turns into an underlying attitude that taints everything we do. 'Life is like this, people are like that, that's all I'll ever be, why bother trying to change anything?'

Any problem is made worse by self-view. Self-view prevents us from bringing mindful awareness onto a difficult state because it brings up a blur of opinions about ‘how I should be’ and ‘I shouldn’t be feeling this way’ and ‘what’s wrong with me?’ Sometimes it is stuck so close to the heart that it’s like wallpaper in the living room – you hardly notice it, let alone investigate it. So the familiar sense of who I am retains old habits rather than releasing them: from that place we either assume that ‘I’m fine the way I am,’ or ‘I am basically a mess/failure.’ Both of these self-views keep us stuck in our habits. There is a way of becoming a better person, but it’s through directly addressing suffering and stress. This means being clear and skilful with regard to whatever mind-state arises. In this respect, mindful awareness allows us to no longer buy into and feed old habits; the skills that develop through working on the mind bring it joy, ease and wisdom.

To prevent the contemplation of our mental habits becoming a self-absorbed obsession, we develop an enquiry into what supports or causes the mental state. The Buddha considered deep attention (*yoniso manasikāra*) to be a valuable asset in the process of such enquiry. Deep attention takes a train of thought or a topic and keeps referring it not to my identity, but to whether it evokes suffering or alleviates it. It goes under the topic of thought to the mindset (say, of worry or of compassion) that underpins it. Then when mindfulness holds the thought with that reference we can investigate: ‘Is this something I want to encourage?’ And if not: ‘What does this mindset depend on?’ ‘What would it be like without this mindset?’ And, ‘What does it need to find release?’

For example, we may begin with deliberately reflecting on a topic of personal concern. Maybe we’re thinking about a friend or relative. Deep attention may reveal a train of thoughts as based on the mood of regret; then rather than dismiss the feeling, or add more regret, we respond to the suffering or stress that’s present in the mind. In many cases what’s needed is kindness towards ourselves and others. And that begins with

acceptance of the mind-state as a state. We don't have to make into an identity. Then, when there is acceptance and a response, it allows the state to change.

At other times, the investigation might deepen into an investigation of any mind-state, even positive ones. Mind-states such as happiness tend to hold attention. With investigation into this effect, we can feel any underlying attachment to that state as a certain tightening or contraction of awareness. Negative states condition a tension in the mind as it tries to get rid of that feeling. Positive ones condition a tension to hold on or increase the duration or the intensity of the feeling. But if we could feel the feeling just as a feeling, *rather than as me and mine*, then we can relax a little and let it move through. Investigation of mind-states (*dhamma-vicaya*) teases out the tangle that ties an image to a feeling, to a reflex of holding and rejecting. When we can separate the feeling from the aversion to it or fascination with it, the lock can release. In this way, investigation of mind-states supports letting go and freedom of mind (See **Release** in the third part of the book for more on this theme.)

Of course this process has to be accompanied by kindness and forgiveness where necessary (and sometimes, the difficulty is in forgiving oneself). These qualities will come a lot easier if we just find a way out of the spin of blaming, or even trying to get rid of the unpleasant mood. A basic resource is to ground attention in the body, and further to feel the bodily affect – the tension in the throat or sinking in the belly – and keep mindfulness there. So we refer the felt meaning of an event or a thing to the inner bodily sense. We don't have to explain it, or go into the story that accompanies it. What is the effect of that 'regret' sense – a hard ball in the diaphragm, a wavering jelly in the pit of the stomach? In this way, we turn the attention's aim from solving or avoiding into one of investigation. Then, 'What does this feeling need?' And then we let any answer – maybe space, or a deep breath – come from the body. That release allows the mindset to shift by itself. We don't have to fix it.

Essentially the new approach is one of empathy: what would the sense need, what does it want to do or be? Then the theme of the practice is to do nothing but to keep attending with mindfulness and empathy. What may occur is an intuitive realization regarding the problem that triggered the feeling: we may decide to visit the relative or write a meaningful letter, and that feels right and genuine. Or the resolution may be in terms of a shift of attitude around responsibility. Maybe that helps us to value ourselves and yet also be attuned to how we affect others. We have come out of the 'self' of our habitual strategies into a broader and more balanced response.

## Clearing the Mind: Skilful Enquiry

Establish a supportive bodily presence, a sense of uprightness. Connect to the ground beneath and the space above and around the body. Acknowledge sitting within a space, taking all the time and space that you need.

Establish the overall bodily sense through feeling the breathing: first in the abdomen, allowing the breath to descend through the soft tissues...Feel the flexing of the breath in respiration. Relax the shoulders and open the connecting tissues between the upper arms and the chest...Feel the breathing flexing the chest, giving it all the space that is needed.

Let your head feel open by relaxing the jaw and settling the tongue in the floor of the mouth. As if you were removing a scarf, or unbuttoning a collar, let the neck and throat feel free. Feel the breathing move through the throat. Relax any holding around the eyes, the forehead and the temples. Sense any attitudes of tightening or preparation...take some time to do nothing. Trust a restful awareness.

If you feel unsettled – snagging flurries or sags of energy or mood – draw attention down your back to the ground, allowing the front of the body to flex freely with the breathing; loosen up in the abdomen. Attune to the rising breath – up through the chest and throat – if you feel heavy or flat. Using these references, gradually step out of your world of functions, events and relationships, and into the space of embodied awareness...all the time in the world to be just this...

Then allow an aspect of your daily world into awareness; something that nags or weighs on your mind. There may be a few, so choose one that heads the list and feel it out: maybe it's the 'so much to do...'; or the 'I really need this'; or the 'they shouldn't be like this'...Contemplate the effect in terms of the body; sense how the emotion moves energy or holds tension in bodily terms.

This effect may feel familiar, and you may want to shrug it off or accept it. Maybe the whole thing is held in aversion, or an unwillingness to deal with the topic. But, rather than do that, create an attentive space around the original sense and the responses that come up.

For example, maybe there's some resignation or frustration: is it OK to be with that, just for a while? Let the breathing and the giving flex through that. Don't make an issue out of concentrating on breathing; widen and soften your awareness and feel whatever seems connected to the breath-rhythm in the body. Sense the breathing as a feeling that steadies you in your body.

As the mind relaxes its unwillingness to be with the feeling, there may be a shift to a deeper, more volatile feeling – such as grief or anger. Try to sense the effects of these in the body, and curtail any thinking about the topic. If it seems too intense, keep your eyes open and strengthen your ground in the body. You can do this by steadying your breathing, or by gently squeezing your hands, or by moving around. Let the energies of the emotion move and keep a sympathetic awareness of all this.

Keep the enquiry in mind: 'What does this need? What gives this some space to be?' (Rather than 'What should I do?') Attune to the empathic spirit of that enquiry, but don't try to change anything. Bear this in mind until you feel that something has shifted in your response, or that it has given you a key to deeper understanding. Compassion towards the response may arise, something that relieves you from aggravating, defending or burying it.



Conclude by coming back to the body: the central structure and the soft tissues wrapped around that, the skin around that, the space around all that. Slowly open your eyes, attuning to the space and the sense of the place that you're sitting in. Consider how that aspect of your world is now.



## **Difficulties**

Enquiry can go wrong if it is not systematic – if we jump in, or push forward into emotional currents with the idea of ‘getting to the root of all this,’ we may find ourselves overwhelmed. The systematic training is to start with just being able to hold the problem mindfully, and then attend to what it feels like in general to be with this problem. It is this very sense of ‘being stuck with this’ that must first of all be accommodated. The stuckness may feel tense and uptight, or held down and numb, or bristling and excited. It will generally demand action: even if it is the seductive plea to dull out these thoughts in activity or sleep. So first try to stay conscious with that rather than dull out or move onto another topic. Get a reference through resonance and evaluation – ‘the mood feels tight, hard’ – and then enquire into that mood as to what it needs or where it is. What does it feel like in the body? Where is it being felt? In the chest, head or belly?

Remember just to empathize; don't do anything. Let any shift happen and any suggestions come intuitively – after the shift into mindful awareness. Take your time and stay grounded. A long-term problem might not unwind in one session; maybe it's OK just to be less reactive to it.

Another problem can be that we have an idea of what we want to investigate...but right now it isn't manifesting. We can try to be more in charge of our moods than they will allow us to be. This is a problem when we have an analytical mindset, and are keen on getting things all figured out. If that is the case, more to the point is to investigate the emotive base of that very mindset.

At other times, the problem is that things seem too vague and nothing special is going on. Fine. You can always return to mindfulness of breathing...or spreading kindness...or perhaps just ask the question: 'Is there anything here which prevents me from feeling really at ease?' Maybe that vague 'nothing going on' is a dull state masking other feelings. Sometimes our system just sedates or numbs out when there is seemingly irresolvable frustration, loneliness or a loss of meaning in life...Maybe this isn't the time to investigate that, but at least it's good to stay with the dull, slightly sleepy state with a sense of empathy and attention. This encourages the unfolding of the mind-state in its own time.



### **If this form doesn't help you...**

Rather than looking for in-depth reasons and causes, allow yourself to follow how a train of thought operates, how it goes from this topic to that. When you can witness that, try articulating to yourself any aspects of how it felt. For example: 'it started off slowly and drifted, then it picked up some speed and seemed excited, then it felt happy or angry, and then...'

Try writing a 'stream-of-consciousness' piece that is just a record of five minutes of your mental flow. You don't have to get every detail. Then check out the 'voice' in that piece. It may be exuberant, or musing, or it might be the inner critic (see below).



### **Further**

#### **The Inner Critic**

Very often we come across states and voices in our minds that are almost like people in their own right. One such character is the inner critic. The inner critic is a voice that belittles, blames and complains about us. It demands that we be wiser, happier, purer than we are right now – but offers no advice on how to bring that about. The inner critic picks up and

broods over aspects of ourselves that we dislike or feel ashamed of. It also brings up our past shortcomings in a judgemental way. Meanwhile, in the present it criticises or ridicules our efforts; it can never offer any encouragement, appreciation or empathy.

When this is running, direct your attention to the feeling of the persona, that inner critic itself. Shift from the topic to the mind-state that's doing the commentary. Who is this? Who's telling you how you should be, or how things should be, or how other people should be? How does that voice or energy feel? Contemplate its very texture as contracted or tense or agitated and let it be that way. Hold it carefully like it's a child having a tantrum, or someone in a fit. Listen to it in an empathic way: How do I feel about being with this? Can the sense of empathy and acceptance extend to include this one?

If you can extend some empathy or just be calm and present with the critic then try asking, 'How does the critic feel? What would it be like to be this one? What does it need?' (Remember to not provide or even look for an answer. Just provide the sense of empathic enquiry.)

There may be other characters: such as the 'have a good time' voice that says we should just relax and not get so intense; or the victim who has always been unfairly treated; or the hero who takes him/herself very seriously...and so on. Practise with these in a like fashion.



## Direct Investigation of the Mind

Get a feel for a mind-state. Refer to it in more concrete terms as heavy or bright, warm or hard, without translating it instinctively into an idea that carries all kinds of reflex reactions. If we call a mind-state 'depression' it automatically is held as bad and something to get rid of. But in that scenario, I can't get rid of it – I can't get the energy or the inspiration to come out of the depression, because my apparent self is too depressed to do so. That sense of helplessness then adds to my depression. However, if

the mind-state is experienced as a sense of falling inwards and downwards into something grey and heavy, it's possible to get a feel for that, and contemplate it. First try to feel the sense of being well and steady – wherever that is. Then, refer to it, extend it to include the whole body, breathe through it, and perhaps slow the breathing down to cause the breath-energy to brighten. This then acts as a counterbalance to the constrictive effects of a negative mind-state.

As you get more skilled at doing this, breathe the positive effect, or let it rest and flow through the negative effect – slowly, with all the time in the world and with no wish to fix, remove or understand the negative state.

## ***Muditā*: Sharing in Joy**

*Muditā* means ‘appreciative (or empathic) joy.’ It’s the happiness that arises from appreciating other people’s (or one’s own) good fortune. It comes from acknowledging the basic happiness, the freedom from pain, fear or grief that all beings seek. It can be sensed as the buoyancy that occurs when we touch into well-being or whenever a difficulty ceases – even temporarily.

This quality, which flows into appreciation, contentment and gratitude, is tremendously nourishing. It is however, something we lose contact with. Often we’re dwelling in the future with desire or anxiety, or in the past...and even in the present, the mind snags on what we find irritating, and is programmed to imagine how much better things could be than they are right now. It takes an effort to imagine how much worse things could be! This critical program motivates us in terms of discovery and invention, but it’s numb to appreciation and contentment. Without the balance of being able to appreciate the good fortune, the relief from pain and distress that we have right now, the mind gets stuck with the inner critic, the voice of complaint and negativity. This faultfinding negativity can dog everything we do and snipe at other people as well. We don’t see the good things that we/they do, or we see our own or others’ unskilful actions as some kind of permanent identity. When this critic (called *āraṭi* in Buddhism) takes over, cynicism, jealousy and more subtly, indifference, also grow. They make our hearts gloomy, petty and contracted. And even when it’s just that sense of resignation, *āraṭi* closes down access to well-being and joy.

It's good to consider what gets in the way of this natural joy. Factors such as perfectionism, performance drive and goal orientation will have the *ārati* side effect unless they're balanced with appreciation. Meditation itself gets tense when we expect results and neglect a sense of appreciation. So it's important to cultivate a sense of respect for the aspiration and commitment that gets us to meditate in the first place. I generally advise meditators to reflect and dwell on the goodness that is already there in terms of ethical sensitivity and integrity, and let the heart fill with that at the beginning of a meditation session. Effort requires nourishment: it's the common sense measure of putting gas in the tank when setting out on a journey.

As with the other bases of kindness and empathy, once we put aside the differences in personality and status, it's easy to refer to other people as much the same as ourselves. We sympathize with their suffering and shortcomings, and are gladdened by their happiness and goodness. So it's skilful to keep returning to the basics in oneself and others, to attune to the specific presence of people and things without adding comparisons of self with others or past with future.

We can let go of the tendency to judge in terms of who deserves what, and how things should be: who knows? And where does happiness arise from – in ourselves and in others? It's through appreciation, not through accountancy – and appreciation of our own humanity is something that a downturn of fortune doesn't deprive of us of. So when we cultivate *muditā*, it's based not on who deserves what, but on the wish that we or others get in touch with our innate goodness. It also causes self-improvement: whoever is more appreciative is going to be more contented, less demanding and irritable. As a consequence, they're going to act a lot more skilfully.

When we attune to a fundamental sense of being, rather than just our personality or our current concerns, we can be simply open and present. It's through this, rather than adding a whole list of approvals, that we arrive quite naturally at appreciative joy.

## Cultivate Appreciation for Oneself

While sitting, standing, walking or reclining, cultivate appreciation with reference to yourself...

Centre your awareness in your body, being aware of the general form, the central core and the breathing. Explore the relatedness of all this: the whole body being an interplay between the light flow of breathing and the firm stability of the body's mass. Acknowledge the inner space of the body and the outer space around it, with the breathing connecting the two – now reaching out, now reaching in...a sharing sense.

Every few moments a breath comes to be. Every few moments the shared air enters, permeates, saturates the body. Every few moments the body empties its breath into the shared air. Let yourself be held in this interplay.

Finer even than breath, each moment mind comes to be. Thoughts, attention, moods well up and move out into the silence. Each moment, something is received – a sight, sound, touch or intuition – some with purpose, some without; some with reaction, some with the resonance of awareness. Sense the present vibrancy.

Acknowledge the conscious system that you are – living from one moment to the next. Who or what is that? Cultivate a sense of wonder and then of thankfulness. Dwell with that for a while.

Consider your own body, the parents whose genes established it and the many life forms that sustain it. Allow your mood to be part of that sustenance by appreciating your body. In doing that, attune to and enjoy the participation which that sense affords.

Enjoy, with mindful awareness rather than thoughts, your own presence. Attune to the specific uniqueness of how that is right now. Appreciate your presence. Acknowledge any need for boundaries, such as the wish

to be private or unnoticed: appreciate that protective function but check now whether there is a need for defence. Notice how the defended sense affects your body. If the present space around your body, chest, throat, etc. is safe...can the body relax? Work on laying a boundary aside, temporarily. Feel a little freer.

Soften the impulse to do or be something special. All that you need right now is here.

Allow yourself to feel open and keep acknowledging the nourishment that the air is bringing you, the steadiness of the ground beneath and the willing receptivity of the knowing space that wraps around you. Feel the steady support of your own bodily centre.

Enrich this mood with reference to wholesome actions that you have done or kindly aspirations that you have, or ongoing intentions for supporting others. These recollections, which the contracted mind obscures, may now be more apparent. Give yourself time to recollect, sense and get a feeling for them. Where does this ethical and compassionate sensitivity arise from now? Where is the source of the great heart?



### Practise Extending Appreciation to Others

Recollect an occasion when you felt that your presence was enjoyed by another person. Recall how that felt, return to that feeling and try to stay within that in the present.

Acknowledge that you're part of a creation in which beings live with a consciousness turned towards looking after and protecting themselves. Recognize in all of them the vitality that rises up, the wish to be alive that living beings have. Attune to the well-being that the resources of the planet bring. Join in their interest that this well-being not be parted from them.



While staying centred, practise introducing the perception of the actions and happiness of others. Sense the joy that arises when a person meets again a dear friend or a relative that they have been separated from. Attune to the happiness that occurs when someone attains a goal that they had been working for. Acknowledge that it does not lessen you. Stay connected to the arising of the happiness that you feel they have.

Work through the perceptions of those one feels are worthy of good fortune, then advantaged, then privileged. Consider them as happy. Stay connected to your own ability to empathize when you bring to mind people who have greater good fortune than yourself. Stay connected to the sense of happiness but let go of whose it is.

Introduce the perceptions of people who are worthy and who have little good fortune, but not much suffering. Attune to the inner strength and contentment that they may have.

Acknowledge people living in hardship who have to develop intelligence to bring themselves to safety and well-being. Appreciate the skills and strengths that living beings develop in order to sustain life. Remember the happiness that arises when one comes out of deprivation or trouble and into comfort. May all beings find their way out of suffering!

Introduce the perception of people who experience a lot of suffering. Attune to the simplicity of the relief related to any lessening of suffering, and to the ability for people, even in states of deprivation, to bear with their suffering and care for their families or friends. As you recognize this fundamental strength, also appreciate its support in your life and in that of others.



## **Difficulties**

The obvious difficulties associated with *muditā* are faultfinding, jealousy and indifference. With all of these, one thing that helps is to acknowledge

how unpleasant these make our own minds and hearts. Secondly, to acknowledge that these all stem from a particular focus – they are not objective truth. Focus, or attention, is a conditioned factor and in all these cases it isn't bearing the whole picture in mind. With indifference, attention doesn't even extend very far. It only takes a glimpse and omits any reference to the heart of conscience and concern. So when that mode prevails, it may be that we're just overloaded with concerns or defending ourselves against being affected. Then it's good to take time to recollect one's own well-being, how one feels right now.

When attention goes into faultfinding, maybe we've lost touch with the context or the specific character of the person that we're finding fault with. Maybe their actions were clumsy, or that piece of language felt offensive...but perhaps she/he/I was acting in haste or from a reflex...or maybe that's as good as we could get it right now. How can we help someone or ourselves improve? In any case, we should acknowledge their good side and speak to that good side about the concerns we feel. A good person will want to know where they're short of the mark or letting themselves and others down. The first step then is to get in touch with 'the good person.' That's what *muditā* is about.

With jealousy, the point to bear in mind is that other people's good fortune needn't diminish your own well-being. If you allow it to, you'll always be in trouble. Guard the well-being of an appreciative and contented heart.

A less apparent difficulty is that one gets too excited with *muditā*. Contemplate the snatchy quality of excitement and how it reduces clarity, balance and mindfulness. Rest back a little.



## If this form doesn't help you...

You may benefit from taking interest in the natural world. Explore just for the sense of interest and discovery. Take up exercise that puts you in touch with how the body works. From there you may find interest in observing and being part of group activities where some of that enjoyment comes from the shared sense – trekking, a hobby and so on. Consider that no matter who or what else seems to be the source of that happiness, that feeling is arising in your mind or heart. Notice where and how that is.



## Further

Settle into and contemplate the quality of *muditā*:

Move from considering any object or person into the awareness that attunes to the joy of sharing. Where does this ethical and compassionate sensitivity arise from now? Where is this great heart?

Contemplate that sense, letting the mind take in the boundlessness of that. Acknowledge that dualities of 'you', 'me' and 'how he/she was,' are a play of consciousness. Sense the separateness of beings to be like currents in the wind that give the wind its manifest qualities. Trust, or be thankful for, that wind.

After an appropriate period of time, return to the interplay of the breath, and allow your sense of yourself to get reestablished. Welcome this as you would a good friend coming home from a long journey.

## Breathing through States of Mind

This instruction brings mindfulness of breathing directly onto the affective mind. Previously we attended to the breathing in bodily terms to get our somatic energies straightened out and flowing steadily; now we turn to the psychological and emotional realms. Body, then mind: it's presented in that order because attending to the body has a good effect on the mind – it makes it fit to work on itself.

In the Buddha's presentation of this theme, there's a tetrad of four points: to breathe with sensitivity to rapture, with sensitivity to ease, with sensitivity to the mental energy (*citta-sankhāra*) and then to breathe calming and soothing this energy. This is the energy of mental sensitivity that, as it ripples, creates states of mind.

'States of mind' can mean attitudes, emotions or impulses. So this practice is about how we're feeling. To be more accurate, the meditation isn't based on any particular state, so much as the handling of the energy that keeps pumping them out. It takes us into our tendencies to overreact or under-respond, to withdraw or get excited or irritable. These tendencies make up our mental/emotional profiles and the specific ways in which each individual feels and responds, feels overwhelmed or undernourished. It governs how each of us assesses things and responds – and even how we sense ourselves and the world. When I'm feeling angry or threatened, I may sense myself as a victim and form cynical views about others or society in general. On the other hand, with anger, I might consider myself to be champion of the true and the just. These patterns are played out all the time in human society. Even when our emotional patterns are relatively moderate and acceptable, the fixity of their profile makes our

lives tedious and habitual. You know – same old fluster, same need for approval, etc. In meditating on this, we're not trying to have an emotional facelift, but rather to acknowledge these patterns. Then we're less likely to act upon them or react to them. So whether it's sky-blue elation, pink serenity, glittering fantasies, smouldering grudges or muddy moods and doubts – we aim to meet them all without aversion or wavering. Then we can handle and release any tendency to get stuck.

We do this by using the breathing to tone up our receptivity and mental energy. The rule of thumb is to put the mental and emotional topics to one side when we begin the meditation and get a solid foundation in the body. Then we tap into the underlying energy that feeds and is affected by body and mind – the nervous energy if you like. We steady and spread this through the whole of the body and this brings around relief, refreshment and quiet happiness. Tuning into that happiness uplifts the mind and as one attends to that quality, a sense of buoyancy arises. This is rapture (*pīti*). Rapture occurs dependent on the awareness being released from the constrictive effect of the hindrances. It has physiological and emotional effects, ranging between senses of connectedness, of flow, of uplift, of wonder, of joy or of elation: from a sense of zestful presence to quite turbulent thrills. An analogy likens rapture to the uplift that would occur in the mind of a thirsty traveller in the desert who sees a lake in the near distance. The overall quality of the experience is a heightening or intensification of awareness with a pleasurable feeling. Ease (*sukha*) occurs when, using the previous analogy, one has drunk the water. Ease is a pleasurable feeling (*vedanā*), whereas rapture is an energised, but unsteady, activity (*sankhāra*).

Through spreading and softening the energy of rapture the mind can shift to the more satisfied state of ease. Tuning in to this enables us to attend to inner ease, rather than chasing after pleasure on the external plane. This source of happiness is based purely on mindfulness and non-involvement – on stepping out of the stream of mental topics rather than adding new topics. Then there's no need to compete with anyone else, or feel disadvantaged by social status. In fact we're not even trying to get

rapturous, but rather to tune into and breathe through our minds. Rapture will come by itself if we're clear and attuned to breathing, and it isn't even the main point of the practice. Rapture can support the process of settling and understanding mental energy – but it can be a sidetrack and obscure that process if the mind gets obsessed with it.

The main theme of this practice is to handle the energy that gets stirred up by memories and moods and free it from that basis. Ordinarily, an image pops into the mind about someone or something, and we find ourselves inspired, dejected, angry or elated. The activation-energy shifts in accordance with the flow of mental perceptions and images – and the flow just keeps moving from one clip to the next. One pushed button triggers off another and so on. We can be busy in the present getting steamed up about an event that happened a decade ago, or we can be guessing at how things could be. Perception is mesmerising; that's why for liberation it has to be handled and steadied. When we can do this, we recognize that those memory clips and dreams are just that – like old movies that don't do much more than stir and express our passions. Sometimes we like doing this because it makes us feel alive. But when there's a steady flow of bright feeling through meditation, memories and passions feel rough and unsatisfying. Because this causes the appetite for new passions to wane, it brings around shifts in one's psychology. Beware! Meditate frequently and you could start feeling contented, with no fixed opinions...

So this practice gives us insight into what moves our hearts and minds, and how precarious and random that flow of perceptions normally is. We also get to know for ourselves that a shift to peace and coolness isn't only good in theory but personally manageable – and enjoyable too.

Over months or years of practice, as your bodily energy and mental energy gets clearer, they can merge into a unified state of absorption. Details of this are offered below.



Focus on how breathing feels as you settle into your bodily awareness. It may feel soft or warm or bright. Let the process of evaluation handle the breath-impression, admiring it and working it through the impression of the body. How does the rhythm and energy of the in-breath and the out-breath feel? What is the specific quality of that rhythm?

Let the breath-energy move through any perceived boundaries in the body, while staying connected to the core of in and outflow. Acknowledge and mollify the tensions between the joints or around tight muscles or withheld places in the chest, abdomen, head or throat. If the body doesn't completely relax, relax the resistance to, or concern about that. Find the place in the body where the mind most comfortably settles, and as you settle there, sense the breath-energy spreading around the body.

Smooth and quieten the energy of the breathing, like softening your voice to speak quietly to someone close-up. Keep working with this until the in-breathing and out-breathing feel the same, and there seem to be no breaks in the energy-flow.

In the course of doing this, the mind will try to revert to its more habitual energy-flow by bringing up more stimulating images and memories and topics that arouse worry, desire, regret or irritation. Without reacting to these, feel their energy and breathe through them. The stimulation will generally have a speeding, tightening or destabilising effect, so incline towards slowing down, widening and softening. Maintain the central focus on the breathing, and widen and soften as if the breath were spreading through your tight or speedy state like a soft mist, having no aim and creating no conflict with how you're feeling. Keep doing this in a consistent and gentle way.

Notice the voices and moods that the mind brings up and how they feel like you; notice their importance and intensity and attend at first to the easier ones. Be patient and breathe a steady softening and widening energy through them. As you do so, you may notice effects on the overall mood: you may feel more spacious or tender or quiet. Some of the moods

and voices that you've always followed get to seem like visitors rather than the host. As this sense deepens, some of those moods and voices may quietly slip out the back door.

At any moment when the inner chatter stops and your attention fully connects with the breathing, notice the mental energy steady and relax. Enhance that effect by enquiry and evaluation: imagine what the breathing seems like in terms of the elements; say there's a sense of groundedness or warmth or light. There may be an impression of space or silence, or a colour or a brightness. These may not be distinct at first, but they give an impression that is calm and full of quiet attention. As the quality of calm gets more fully established, ease the energy that you apply to focusing.

When the mind gets quieter, let the attention meet and merge with the breath-impression, so that the mind becomes that bright and calm sense. Gradually let the more deliberate action of focusing come to rest. Feel the sensitivity and vibrancy of the awareness, and rather than holding on to it, let it hold the mind. Note that vibrant state and the finer, more rested feeling that comes periodically when even that vibrancy quiets – like watching a wild bird wheel and soar. Give it space, content to let it flutter and swoop, occasionally settling before rising up again. As you grow more comfortable with the process of rapture, give the breathing away, letting it be still and open, not your own. Be the awareness, vibrant and sensitive, and acknowledge the finer more rested feeling at the fading ripple of the sensitivity. Rest that into the breath-impression. As evaluation becomes still, acknowledge and settle comfortably into the feeling of being held by that impression with its uplift and ease. Keep the focus on the sense of being settled or settling to any degree. If you keep attuning to the degree of stillness that there is, making that the most important aspect, the stillness will firm up into **one-pointedness** (*ekaggatā*).

After a suitable period of time or when awareness begins to flutter, move towards the intention, then the activity, of discrimination. But do so slowly and mindfully: don't snap out of the absorption, but begin



exercising evaluation on how it is right now; establish evaluation in the present on the sense of hereness, and enjoy that. Let that separate into a sense of a subject, a witness, attending to the rhythm of the breathing as an object. Then feel out the form of the body, its structures and movements.



## **Difficulties**

When the mind does get stuck in its moods and memories, focus not on the topic, but on the way of handling its energy. For a start, regularise the breath-impression with thoughtfulness and evaluation. It's like the way a mother cat cleans her kitten with her tongue. She holds it firmly but gently and keeps working over the kitten's fur with a caring and attentive vigour. Settling is not just a matter of calming down, it also means working steadily. However the breath-impression is sensed, get a hold on it and work it clean of dust and tangles.

If many images and perceptions arise, keep returning to the body and cooling the energy by shifting to the breathing out, especially by breathing out through the soles of the feet and palms of the hands, or anywhere that feels less charged.

Kindness and patience as attitudes and widening and softening the attention span are helpful. So if you experience anxiety or agitation when you relax deliberately applied attention, attitudes like trust, lightness of touch and receptivity are helpful. Rest in the qualities of the uplifted mind to allow that 'handing over' of the will.

A later difficulty comes when one is fascinated by the quality of rapture – whether it's present or just a hankered-after fantasy. The core of the obstacle is our need to have fascinating and rapturous experiences, so the mind hangs on and gets greedy. Then we fall into the error of being convinced that a mind-state can be real and lasting. If we can't manage

to get it or maintain it, we get frustrated. On the other hand, if we are able to sustain a rapturous mindstate for a period of time, that can give rise to conceit.

These problems are best addressed by careful review as to the stressful nature of pushing and holding on. All mindstates depend on some conscious or unconscious holding. What or who is holding? Who or what do I want to be or have? This helps us reveal the sense of self that is doing the practice.

Who is that? Do you believe in them? Or isn't he/she another visitor pretending to be the owner of the mind? Contemplate the changeable nature of mental energy and refer to the subsiding aspect of each uplifting surge; or if it seems continual, to the nature of being affected – the overwhelmed effect. Try listening in to that overexcited effect and respond by being spacious and patient. This helps the reactivity to quieten down.

What needs to be attended to with any agreeable result is the tendency to try to create more. We may have had an insight and wish to return to it or we may have read of someone else's insight and try to replicate it. With this, we get pushy again. We miss the vital point of attending to the process as it happens, or we get impatient and skip stages in a process. All this jars and tangles our mental sensitivity. Check this by starting afresh each time and attending to the specific quality of what arises in the present. The practice works better like that.



### **If this form doesn't help you...**

Contemplate how rapture and ease arise in other ways...perhaps when listening to music. Notice what your attitude, attention and awareness are like in that state, and try to bring that mix to mind when you meditate.

Notice what moves you in a negative or positive way in your daily life. Recollect these matters and incidents, and as you bring them to mind, feel the bodily effect, the change of pace and tone of the thoughts. This change of pace and tone is a change in energy. Putting the topic to one side for a few moments, attend to the energy. Is it bright, fiery, flat, or recoiling? Are the bodily effects in your head, throat, heart, belly? Contemplate this way, applying interest and willingness to the effects in terms of energy and body. When you can be open about your sensitivity, attend to a sensitive area and notice how you are breathing. You might even gently stop your breath for a few seconds and then gently release it. Do this several times with any topic and sense the effects in terms of how the emotion moves. Sense how you can witness the emotion with a cool and kindly eye.



## **Further**

### Absorption

To summarize: the process of entering absorption is through accessing and smoothing out the bodily and mental energies. First work on establishing the subtle form of the breath-energy, the 'inner body' that your breathing moves through. Relinquishing other perceptions of the body, such as 'hands,' 'head,' etc., notice any imbalances in that felt body. Adjust attitude (you may need to soften a little, or be patient) and focus (you may need to widen your focus) and let the steady breathing keep flowing through the whole of that felt body. If you keep focusing on the unifying factor of breathing, there will be a unifying effect.

The perception will be of a bright form and the feeling will be pleasant. This is when rapture is liable to occur. Focus on the appearance of that quality in any degree; it may be experienced as an absence of pressure, or the diminution or absence of hindrances. Feel that quality of uplift, focus on it, then enjoy and rest in it to make it quite consistent.

When rapture becomes more consistent, subsequently incline towards the perception of the felt body at rest. Put less attention on the uplifted feeling. This will lead to ease.

With ease, the bodily and mental energies start to merge. Deepen this by focusing on the quality of stillness or firmness. The factor of bringing to mind, of consciously steering, will lessen as the energetic current becomes peaceful and bright. Focus on a still centre, or on any aspect of stillness that can be discerned in the field of awareness. Thinking will stop. Further deepening comes through inclinations of the heart towards a quieter and firmer inner abiding.

### Insight and Integration

Reviewing the mind is important for understanding and integration. Whatever the content of a mental experience, from drab to ecstatic, we can contemplate the process as changeable, or liable to change because experience comes around through qualities of attention and intention and impression – and these themselves are variable. This is the view of insight. If you adapt to that view of the changeability of mental flow, the mind becomes more dispassionate. Being unmoved by what is designed to move us leads to a stopping and peaceful relinquishment of our former appetites, habits and reactions: no need to reach out, no need to recoil. This is integration of the practice.

With the insight into effect and response, we can acknowledge the degree to which our sense of self is bound up in all that: how much we depend upon particular boosts, or register an absence of emotive charge as boring or depressing. We can check the need to feel high or aroused or stable and unaffected. This is just one profile of our apparent self. If we can acknowledge and not keep recreating that, if we can relax from projecting our own moods and views onto others, then the heart can enter a shared and sharing universe. This is wonderful.

## **Theory: Kamma, Self and Liberation**

*And what is kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of kamma? Mindfulness as a factor of Awakening, investigation of qualities...persistence/energy...rapture...tranquillity...concentration...equanimity as a factor of Awakening. [A. 4.238]*

In this part of the book we've been looking into the mind as the basis of our emotions – as that in us which feels, gets hurt, complains, aspires and is motivated for good or bad. Much of the practice here has been about acknowledging what's going on at this level, enquiring into it, steadying it and releasing it from hindrances and afflictions. This process often touches into how we sense ourselves in relation to the world and other people. We can feel slighted or welcomed by people's behaviour, useless or in demand with regard to a work or family situation. These felt meanings carry a meaning that forms who we seem to be – a winner, a no-account, a trusted partner, a loner or whatever. People will commit huge amounts of their resources, and even risk their lives to get to be a winner with that 'top of the world' feeling. And at the other end of the spectrum, there are suicides and the self-destructive behaviour of those who feel they are hopeless.

These felt meanings are volatile: they move our hearts and affect how we act. Yet real as it all these feelings seem, they do change; and if I follow them then who I seem to be changes in accordance with them. When I am being 'me, the harassed, overworked' my manner will have a different

flavour than when I'm 'me, welcoming you to my home.' Actually, I have quite a few selves, or subsidiary personalities, which take centre stage dependent on the situation, pressures and natural conditions like health. My world view and motivation may change between one of these personae (these selves that we have within us) and the next – sometimes I can hardly believe it when someone reports back to me what I said when I was in a difficult mood. In fact, I might comment that 'I wasn't quite myself then.'

These ranging personae, any one of which can be occupying the 'me' space at a given time, are based on felt meanings that arise around one's role, function, and relationship – as well as on physical health and current attitude. The most residual ones, the ones that really feel like me, are the ones carried in the heart: 'I am the one who has to do all the work (and receives no recognition)'; 'I am the one who can't manage and needs others to make decisions for me...' and so on. They direct us through event after event, and yet we might not even recognize them as such because the mind will imagine that the feeling is being created not from some internal bias, but from the situation that's occurring around us. Or, after a while, as one finds oneself in yet another rerun of the damaging relationship or in charge of another project that failed because we again underestimated what was needed, the assumption can grow that this bias is our true self. The potentially crippling reaction can set in that 'I am weak-willed' or 'I'm a complete idiot.'

However, there is a wiser and more useful way of understanding the personal predicament. It touches into the Buddha's teachings on *kamma*, and is supported by the meditations we've been working with. And, it can bring around deep changes for the better.

### **What is 'kamma'?**

I've mentioned briefly that *kamma* (or 'karma,' meaning 'action') refers to cause and effect. The term refers to the action that occurs because of intention, i.e. the mind is bent on that action. Such actions leave results in terms of memories and habits. This result is called '*vipaka*' or 'old

kamma.’ So we live within a continuum of action and result, (*kamma-vipaka*), in which whatever we do while conscious of doing it leaves a result in the mind. These results may be experienced as the reactions and responses of others, or as effects on our physical well-being, but the deepest result is mental. That is, our actions have a psychological and emotional result that shapes our minds. After all, this is the way we learn: we do something and from the results – from the feedback that other people or our bodies or our own minds give us – we notice whether that action gave us well-being or pain. Through contact, that feedback gets lodged as a memory, a perception or felt meaning. It’s a detail on our psychological road map of how to proceed through life. That detail, a memory or a piece of behaviour becomes one strand in the weave of our identity. That’s how your mind gets shaped, for good or for ill. And so one result of kamma, good or bad, is the sense of self.

Now maybe the mapping gets messed up. It can be the case that the feedback we received from others was skewed – you know, you told the truth, but someone got annoyed. Still on your map, you’re cautious about going down that track again. Worse still, somebody gave you a hard time, not because of what you did, but because they were having a bad day and you got in the way. This happens a lot. We all get affected by other people’s kamma and this is very confusing. You weren’t doing anything wrong in your own eyes and someone takes a swing at you. Maybe your mother or your father was upset at the time. Maybe the kids at school ridiculed your ears or your voice or your clothes or your skin colour because they thought it was fun, or their parents didn’t like blacks or Jews or Albanians. So you end up hurt or bitter and frustrated because of what other people do – and that affects the way you are in the world. You have all kinds of dangerous territory on your map. The result is you develop a persona accordingly: a ‘self’ with a mental bent towards fear, or towards trying to be liked, or towards bitterness and violence.

Another problem is that we don’t always learn that well: we get a short-term boost and don’t notice the long-term results of, for instance, drinking alcohol. Or we get the happy buzz of buying new things and don’t

take into account the long-term effects on our bank account. Our instincts aren't always based on wise reflection, so confused assumptions about other people or a lack of clarity as to cause and effect are more common sources of bad kamma than a deliberately harmful intent.

The main point of the teaching on kamma isn't who you were in a previous life – you can't practise with that. Nor is it a teaching of predestination, or about divining the future: no Awakening in any of that. It's telling us that what we do while conscious of doing it is something we need to be clear about and work with. If we are consciously motivated by compassion, or by aversion, or by fear (even if someone else has planted that fear in our minds) then those qualities get established in our minds. And every time you act from a felt meaning and mental inclination, the persona that goes with it takes a bigger position in your mind and heart. As you act, so you become. That's kamma, cause and effect. And that's what 'not-self' (*anattā*) implies – what we seem to be, our self, is a dynamic of causes and effects and not some unchanging entity.

Two clear messages come through from this teaching: one is to get clear about action and especially to look into the motivations behind it. Whether we are motivated by anxiety, affection, bitterness or just plain unknown random reaction, these give rise to an anxious, affectionate, bitter or confused personality trait. Continue along those lines and that's whom you sense yourself as being. Therefore meditate, get to know what's going on under the lid, what makes you tick. Be mindful and allow the immediate impulse to be witnessed; let it pass, be questioned, or enhanced. That's the first message.

The second is to know what is good, what you want to live with, what you want to base your life upon. Because any day that life may end, and you don't want to be dying with grudges and anxieties in your heart. If you take the Buddha's word on it, those tendencies that are dominant in your mind when you die will dictate the way another 'you' comes into being in the future. This seems reasonable to me, as it's what happens in this life. But if you don't accept that, still, you'd sooner live in this life without anxiety and regret.



## Perceptions are old kamma

From the above it follows that if we're keen on getting clear as to why we act and what's really going on with all those split-second assumptions of feeling trusted or nervous, the focus is on two strands of mental behaviour. One is felt meaning or perception, the other is the mental activity that informs and responds to that, both of which we've touched on before. So: the broad term 'perception' (*saññā*) refers to both the initial impression of a sense-object, and the felt meaning that is our 'take' on what that thing is. So we might both agree that a stretch of sparkling flowing stuff is the sea – that's the initial reference; but the felt meaning is subjective. One person might see it as dangerous, while another sees it as a lovely place to bathe: the mapping is in accordance with each person's previous experience. Both maps have some truth in them, but holding on to one generates conflict with the other.

It's the activity called 'contact' (which has both a sensory impression aspect and a heart-based meaning aspect to it) that establishes perceptions. So where there's a lot of heart-involvement, the felt meanings get very subjectively mapped. This is very much the case with perceptions of people. When we meet other people, many value judgements and personal biases are bound to occur – this is someone I can trust, need to win over, can help, better be on guard against, etc. Any of these may be so – all perceptions have *some* truth in them – but can we suspend and reflect on the habitual interpretation, the one that first leaps to mind, before acting on it? Can we check the map in the light of mindful awareness? Maybe that impression is pointing to an aspect of another person to bear in mind, or maybe it's telling us something about our own standpoint and bias.

The one who is most subject to our heart-biases is living in our own body, speech and heart: good old me – whatever I have decided I am, will never be and deserve to be. And of course there's also the 'me' sense that arises dependent on how I'm seen by others. As meditators, we watch and feel these felt meanings and personae. We sense them as transient and in

process. We sense them as things that occupy consciousness, but not as belonging to or defining some true and lasting self. If any one of them were really me, then who is the self that's watching them? That reflection offers us the opportunity to respond to perception, to calm it, accept it or look into it rather than to keep following or repressing it.

Thus, we're not obliged to react to the world or the self we seem to be right now. We don't have to make more habitual kamma out of what's happening, or what others do. One of the memorable sayings of the Buddha is: '*We live happily, friendly even amongst those who are hostile*' [Dhp. 197]. In other words, when we're among people who dislike us, we can sense that their attitude is their kamma and leave it there. Their bias doesn't have to take over our own hearts and minds. And we might feel after a few moments (or hours or years) that we could make some good kamma around such impressions. We could clear our own fear and anger. Then, once we've seen how reactive and edgy our own minds can get, we could make peace with, be compassionate and generous – even to people who've hurt us. Why not? We're not being asked to approve of others, just to finish with the grudges and start afresh. This is a big step, but it is what is most truly grand and worthy about humans. We can step out of history and we can step forward in a different way. And in ourselves there's the joy: 'Oh, that mean feeling, that twenty-year-old surge of blame or guilt or vengefulness – it's gone.' We've ended a piece of old kamma and the mind feels spacious, settled and agile. So the encouragement is to Awaken to kamma, to end old kamma rather than try to sort out whose fault it is. This is the ongoing process of liberation.

## **Activities**

In the course of that enquiry, we can get a useful handle on the second strand of mental behaviour, *sankhāra* – 'activities' or 'formations.' They're activities because they're the agents of kamma. Intention is the leader of these, but it's not on its own. Activities are everything that causes, or is liable to cause, action. What this means is that all those qualities that seem to be 'I' as an agent (as in 'I do, I speak, I feel') are not, and aren't issuing from, a solid being, but are repeated activities; programs if you like. But

when these programs get established, they have solidity: hence 'formations.' Furthermore, all those moods and states that seem to be 'me' or 'my self' as an object (as in, 'my real self is a tragic romantic' or 'a misunderstood genius') are formed programs of sorrow, frustration or self-importance. Heart-contact (classically called 'designation contact') will etch these onto our personal map and thereby establish the perceptual references that we judge current experience by. So a mishap gets read as 'Life is tragic,' or 'No one understands me.' Well, true enough in a way, but no one understands anyone all of the time; and life is also comic, resilient and the optimal occasion for Awakening. So the perception is a truth of our own mapping, and the mistake is turning it into an activity.

Other activities, of attention and contact, play a part in this, because attention frames an experience, and contact establishes the perception of it as an accurate impression. So, with regards to attention – if you're not attending to something the contact doesn't happen; you don't get a perception, and you don't get a corresponding intention. (As when you're watching a movie: you don't notice that your leg's going numb, so you don't get the impulse to move.) Also, if contact doesn't place something accurately in terms of your store of perceptions – if you see someone who reminds you of a friend from childhood, when they're not – you get an inappropriate response. To take another example: say you're out walking in the country with a friend, and she suddenly stops dead in her tracks, points ahead and comes out with a Latin name. What you see is a pretty bird sitting in a bush. So you think the name refers to the bird, when in fact it's the name of the bush. You both 'saw' the same thing, but because your respective attentions framed different details of the scene, you had different sense-contact experiences. As it turns out she is a botanist, and gets very excited at the sight of this rare plant; it means a lot to her. But you've seen birds like that many times and think, 'So what?' So the designation contacts differ, dependent on personal history. To take it a step further: her utterance came from an eager (though misguided) intention to share her joy. You think, 'Why not call it a yellowhammer, like everybody else does? Who's she trying to impress!' So here the

intentions get skewed and misinterpreted; she wonders why you've gone dismissive – which triggers things in her, and you think she's being highfalutin or showing off, and that triggers things in you.

This is an example of a kammic process. What we have to acknowledge is that the navigator (attention) can't read that well (or is looking elsewhere), the mapmaker (contact) isn't accurate and the driver (intention) has their own ideas and latent tendencies. This is not good news for the road through life.

Yet it is a cause for Awakening. For starters, it's good to remember that all this is not-self; and, to take to heart the practice whereby you can witness and shift intention, attention and contact. First of all, take intention. What you may notice about those responses and impulses is that they arise dependent on perceptions. Some are re-runs of basic programs and personal history. Some arise through accessing states of tension or numbness in the body rather than through particular thoughts or present-day scenarios. (These embodied states can carry a large amount of 'kammic mapping,' therefore one should work around such areas with sensitivity.) Some are directly disagreeable, such as anger, depression or grief. Emotion can be stimulating and lift us up, but it also uses up huge resources of energy. The search for happy feelings can get us into some addictive pastimes and impair our capacity for responsibility and fellow-feeling. And yet, our life is structured around these activities; and carrying out intentions is what a meaningful life is all about. Indeed so. So we can and do intend towards the clear, the compassionate, the generous. Through wise intention there's the possibility of shifting our activities into a better program.

Meditative training is about doing just this; it's about using activities skilfully. So we cultivate intentions of clarity and kindness. And we cultivate deep attention. These allow us to contemplate contact, perception and any intentions that consequently arise in terms of good, bad, suffering or well-being. In this way the twofold meditative activity of calm and insight (*samatha-vipassanā*) comes into play.

Then what becomes clear is that these activities operate through three channels – body, heart and thought. With some practice we can notice how one affects the others and we get some perspective on their very convincing and compulsive programs – especially the clutching one that keeps creating a sense of self. That’s the one to work on for the release from suffering.

## **The kamma of meditation**

As we’ve seen, kamma is carried out by activities, and so is the release from kamma. For this, in the meditative process, we discern and work with activities in all the channels. First there’s the bodily activity, which gives rise to the sense of ‘where I am.’ It’s the activity, governed by breathing, of having a vital and grounded body, a sense of being located in a physical context. That means there will be many ‘fight, flight, feed on this’ reflexes ready to fire. Second, there’s the mental/heart activity that presents us with moods, feelings, perceptions and intuitions. This tells us ‘how I am.’ And finally, there’s the ‘what I’m going to do (or should do) about all this’: a bubbling energy of thoughts and attitudes. This is our ‘head sense’, our ability to conceive and articulate, the verbal activity. When these *sankhāra* are running, they form our habitual and habituating responses with corresponding thinking, mood and body tone. So: we recognize a task that needs to be done – and our thinking system starts whirring; we see someone we are fond of – and a surge rises up in our hearts; there is a sense of threat or danger – and our bodily sense tenses up. Whether the intention behind them is good or bad, confused or wise, they manifest in a dynamic way and we can witness them in terms of body, heart and thought.

Of the three activities, the heart activity is the most crucial, because this is where conscious action, fresh kamma, originates. Every action originates with a felt meaning, a mental perception that contact places in the heart and which may trigger verbal or physical action. Designation contact places us on our kammic map. Actually it’s more like landing on a trampoline of cause and effect: something touches the heart and we bounce into a reaction. However, we can get off the thing. If we get the

heart to discern, to restrain and to step back from its habits, we can first of all adjust our bounce, and have some choice in terms of what kamma we create. And that initial non-involvement gives us another choice: to investigate a perception and impulse and stop bouncing up and down. Sense-contact doesn't have to dump us on our kammic trampoline. '*From the ceasing of contact is the ceasing of kamma*' as the Buddha puts it [A.6.63].

So the cycle of *kamma-vipaka* can be changed, or stopped altogether through releasing the heart from the grip of activities. Towards this end, using the body is great because although you may have run out of the capacity to feel much patience and compassion for a boss who's been surly and demanding for ten years, or with a three-year-old who's throwing his breakfast at the wall and screaming while you're trying to get his sister dressed...you can still breathe in and out. And know, 'This is where I am, right now.' It doesn't seem to resolve the situation, but it takes you out of the bounce of felt meanings and emotions and 'fix it, do something' programs to a place where you can gather your resources. From there, you can witness and not take the whole scene so personally. This kind of thing has happened and will happen to others; this too will pass and you're not obliged to solve the situation or make it work. Know the feeling as a feeling, be with that urge to scream and lash out – as an activity rather than as me and mine. Let it arise and pass. You don't have to be a character in someone else's movie – or even in your own. You don't even have to take on the 'I should be capable, assured, in charge and able to master this' program and persona. You can put aside the maps and act, or wait, with mindfulness and clear comprehension. You've started freeing up a bit of old kamma. (See **Self-Acceptance** in the following part of the book.)

## **Awakening and 'not-self'**

So freeing oneself from old kamma begins with not letting the old pattern trap you into becoming its stooge. You just feel the activity for what it is. In meditation you can contemplate the activities that move the heart through feeling them in the body – just think of your pet love or hate and feel the flush that happens. And as you feel it, let it move and pass. You'll

probably feel yourself becoming charged up, tight or hot or bristling, you may even recognize the mood of the persona who arises with that activity. Do you need to be/want to be bounced into that person... again? Well, sometimes we do. Much of the time we either want to become the loved and enriched person that floods our nerve endings, or we feel we have no choice but to be the weighed-down loser that the world seems to make us. However, we can choose to contemplate these possibilities. Stepping back into mindful awareness, you can feel how that person is going nowhere but round and round. That's called '*samsāra*' – happy or unhappy, it's the business of going round and round. Then know that for what it is. When you get the point that there's only a virtual self in that round, an appearance that doesn't arrive at anywhere final, maybe the momentum pauses. There may be an emotional shift, or a sense of relief. Subsequently, you can act with clarity and with a clearer view.

In this kind of enquiry, if you're really just exploring how it is, rather than trying to find something, the only mental kamma that you add is that of mindfulness and investigation. This is the kamma that leads to the end of kamma, in that it doesn't establish a new perception of, 'He is one of those' or, 'I am an obsessive person.' Mindfulness and investigation help us to experience the storehouse of perceptions, impressions and felt meanings as programs that run through the body-mind system. Other factors of Awakening follow on the deeper you penetrate the activities. Applied persistent energy keeps you engaged with the process, and keeps your inner hero alive. Its vigour builds up the power of the mind so that we can stand back from habitual activity. This results in the three factors that provide vitality and firmness – rapture, calm and concentration. When the mind is firm and calm, then there is the factor of equanimity directed towards activities; even the good and useful ones you can know are just that, not something to make into a person. That means you can have a good idea without having to shout it from the rooftops. And you can have a helpful insight, or a state of concentration, without getting conceited and obnoxious about it all.

Even these skilful Dhamma activities are not solid, three-dimensional realities; they aren't me or mine. Every place where there's a grip around an activity, it feels like 'me' and the basis for stress is established. So there's a deep learning that has to be done that affects our way of being. In a nutshell, the point is to relax the activity that clings to activities...even to the good ones. Because of course, we're not trying to ultimately get rid of activities, and just sit there like a turnip. Just as we need to have perceptions to get some sketch of what things mean, we also have to come up with an activity as a response. The key point is to get free of the clinging, because it's that which blindly binds perceptions to activities in a habit-forming way. That's kamma.

It should be easy once you know the problem, but kamma has an addictive quality.

Kamma is addictive because we're used to *sankhāra* showing and telling us who we are. Even if our self-view is wretched, the hunger to be something is such an ingrained reflex that we operate around it. Just like a junkie ordering his/her life around getting the next fix: it's never going to be enough, it costs us and we should really snap out of it, but it takes some doing. Beyond what we like to be, there is a reflex to be something solid and permanent that kicks in by itself. This is the reflex of 'becoming.' It provides the support for and is the result of grasping. It wants to be something, some self – and whether that is a millionaire who has far more money than they need, or an athlete who runs their body to rags or a depressive who has a much darker view of themselves than is balanced and true, that instinct pushes us along into self. The rarest experience for a human being isn't bliss, but feeling that they (and life) are 'good enough.' Becoming is insatiable: it always wants more, a new success, a bigger deal, another future. The Buddha said this can go on for lifetimes: he called the process 'further becoming' – which is about as interesting as chewing the same piece of meat for a thousand years. It's only ignorance that keeps us at it!



The subtle aspect of this from the spiritual seeker's point of view is that it's not possible that 'I can get enlightened.' From the position of a solid 'me' trying to gain something, we can't experience full liberation – because that view of self is an activity. It too is a reflex and an addiction. However, we can come out of the addiction by being filled with the deep potential of the factors of Awakening. These provide the inner stability and richness that means the mind doesn't have to keep leaning on the activities, and identifying with feelings, energies and attitudes for support. It doesn't have to be solid thing; when balance is established, the mind can be a process, and one that leads off the bouncy trampoline of kamma.

So generating these factors is the kamma that leads to the end of kamma. Therefore, mindfulness and investigation are crucial. Applied energy and patience are also necessary because some activities have very convincing and compulsive patterns. There's 'righteous me, stuck in an unfair world.' Then again there's the inner tyrant who gives us scathing indictments and endless naggings over our laziness, stupidity, weakness and allround hopelessness. These are important pieces of mental kamma to get free of – and you do so through contemplating the activities with the firmness, bright-heartedness and enthusiasm that comes from non-involvement. Yes, vigour is needed: just sitting there going through the same mental pattern time and time again isn't going to bring release. It can even etch the program deeper. So when you're getting stuck, stay out of that place, regroup around your skills with breathing or get the assistance of another person's mindful awareness. That's what teachers and spiritual friends are for.

As we acknowledge how stuck all of us can get, equanimity arises. This is a very spacious kind of love that neither approves nor disapproves, but offers all the empathic space that we need to allow us to sense our kammic programs without attachment. Then our apparent winning and losing selves can march through without judgement and be seen for what they are. This view offers a life-changing opportunity: when you experience your passions, nagging anxieties and defence strategies as just old kamma,

you can step out of them. You don't have to keep offering board and lodging to hungry ghosts that leave the place in a mess. Instead, in the process of releasing old kamma, you live in a fuller, more spacious and assured way – just because you're not carrying so much stuff around.



Part Three:  
The Release of Awareness



*This is the Deathless, that is the mind's  
liberation through not clinging.*

MIDDLE LENGTH SAYINGS 106.14



## **Theory: Self-Acceptance and Equanimity**

*When a monk sees a form with his eyes, there arises the sense of 'agreeable...disagreeable'...or of 'both.' He understands...'But that is conditioned, gross, dependently arisen. This is peaceful, sublime, that is, equanimity.'* [M.152.4]

There are many ways to develop the important practice of self-acceptance. However you wish to develop, you have to know where you are now and what you're travelling with. So that means ceasing to exaggerate or deny your weaknesses and strengths. Hence, self-acceptance. This doesn't mean approval or justification of actions – in fact, in the context of Buddhist meditation, it isn't really about self, but about revealing the psychological behaviour that is often *taken* to be oneself.

In this process of mindful and equanimous observation, we can experience familiar trains of thought and emotion for what they really are – conditioned activities and not some identity. We use investigation of states to tease apart what seems to be an entity doing something (me thinking) to reveal the event instead as being activities that generate 'me.' That gives us a handle on moderating or stopping these activities, or at least not letting them become ingrained formations.

With investigation we can observe what occurs in the thinking process as: perceptions (mental images), feelings (agreeable or disagreeable) and mental activities – reactions, impulses and constructions such as

confident planning, defence strategies, judgement, speculation and general proliferation. It's these activities that we want to slow down and check, rather than get snared by the perceptions and feelings. Now if we can separate an activity from the image/perception that triggers it and just see it as it is, then the activity is starved of its fuel and tends to fade out. This teasing apart of perception from activity then allows our awareness to rest in itself in a peaceful release. This process also reveals the defective, afflicted or unnecessary psychological activities that generate suffering. However, the intention is one of acceptance: it is through sustaining a wide and unflustered awareness of activities such as self-criticism, guilt or aversion to others that all this painful stuff unplugs.

This focus requires and develops the heart-sense of equanimity. Equanimity is the widest and most still register of the heart. While based on empathy, its response to what it meets is to hold whatever feeling, perception or activity arises in a wide and non-reactive space. Equanimity is a rare quality because our normal response to ourselves and others is to pick at the flaws and to polish and relish the good. This is natural enough, but where equanimity pays off is in meeting situations and conditions that we seem unable to change: the destructive or pointless habits of others, or the irritating phobias and reactions that arise in our own minds. Without equanimity, we either get frustrated to the point of anger or despair, give up and lose faith or we gloss over our confused habits with denial. Equanimity retains empathy – it's not indifferent but it is absolutely patient. When meeting the good, we notice the sense of the skilful and the brightness that it causes – but we don't get giddy and driven by perfectionism to always expect the best from ourselves or others. With the bad, we notice how that is, without getting lost in wounding and blaming. In both cases, we lessen the potential for suffering and stress.

When we practise it in meditation, self-acceptance entails noticing thoughts and emotions with empathy but with a reduction in (and eventually a curtailing of) the reactions of approval, disapproval or final

judgement. This can give rise to two important realizations. First, through maintaining this equanimity, we can see patterns of thought and behaviour as they come and go – and let them do just that. So this provides a neutral space in which to witness what we often take to be ‘myself’ as a dynamic of impulses, thoughts, responses and fresh impulses. Actions and scenarios that happen around us do much the same; we call all of these ‘causes and ‘conditions.’ Seen with the empathic heart-sense (‘What does this feel like?’) but without adding further causes and conditions to the mix, we can know causes and conditions for what they are. Whether they lead to happy or skilful results or to the opposite, they’re not a solid historical person. They’re kamma: they create the impression of self but they don’t arise from, or fully define, some self. (Bad people do some good things, and good people get it wrong sometimes, don’t they?) This is the realization of not-self.

The second realization that depends on equanimity (and on investigation) is that mind-states are radically impermanent. If, through sustaining equanimity, we stay focused on a mind-state, thought or emotion (a *dhamma*, for short) we notice that it ends – not in a sudden stop, but in a fading and an unraveling. If that focus can be sustained, we also notice that any arising *dhamma* doesn’t just pop up out of nowhere, but comes together, or is compounded, from a range of causative effects – such as a sustained intention of dislike or an unpleasant perception that is being held. This is called dependent arising: it’s rather like the way that vapour forms droplets on cool glass. Drops don’t suddenly arise; there is a misting that condenses until droplets form. And that depends on there being a suitable surface (cloth won’t do), coolness and steam. What this means is that *dhammas* that seem entrenched, such as dislike at the sight of spiders, don’t have to stay stuck. If the mind is warm, but with no emotional steam, and if we don’t make the mind into a hard surface, but allow feelings to flow through it, the droplets of dislike will evaporate and gradually cease to occur. This realization deepens the understanding of change to a more penetrative understanding of the fundamental insubstantiality and dependent arising of all *dhammas*.



This may sound like an academic matter, but the two realizations – of not-self and dependent arising – release the mind from its life-defining patterns of habit and attachment.

Equanimity plays the significant part of holding the heart-space open and keeping in touch as we apply investigation. Even as we come up against the difficulties and stuck places in ourselves or others, equanimity is invaluable. It supports the trust that whatever we're going through – good or bad – arises due to and is dependent upon causes and conditions. Things will pass and we can learn from them. To emphasize: the aim here is not to whitewash behaviour that could do with an overhaul, but to release the activity of taking it to be a self. Then when this reflex activity is released or weakened, a truthful assessment and awareness of the possibilities of change can take place. We keep faith with ourselves and others. We can take responsibility for the causes and conditions that our mind encourages in the present, but not be weighed down by the errors of the past.

## Softening and Widening into Awareness

The aim of this exercise is to be mindfully aware of mental processes (*dhamma*) as mental processes. This means attending to them, without getting involved in the topics or the energies that keep them moving. In this way a sense of spacious awareness develops, and from this calm place, insight can arise. We can gain insight into what causes mental processes to arise, and also *that they arise and cease if not engaged in*. This will lead to understanding and a release from these *dhammas*.



Take up an alert sitting or standing posture, one that doesn't cause strain. You may also practise this exercise in the reclining posture – a posture that may allow different moods and thoughts to arise.

Relax the mind from any specific concerns. After a few minutes of centring and steadying the mind through mindfulness of breathing or mindfulness of the body, let the span of your attention widen and refer to the mind itself. By this, I mean shift in the way that you do when you first look at one detail of a painting, or a design, or the layout of a room, and then you widen the focus to include the whole painting, design or layout. But in this case it's a matter of remaining attuned to the steady presence of a calm bodily energy, and widening your awareness to include any mental feelings or mindset that you might have. You will notice, without getting involved or reacting to it, whether that mental process has a skilful or unskilful tone to it, whether its energy is pushy or locked, or whether it's easeful and supported by warmth and clarity. You're contemplating, not the topic of the mind, but how engaged, driven or spacious the mind is with that.

In this way, you bring mental awareness to the fore. Mental awareness is the receptive base of the mind, the 'place' where mental processes happen, the 'me' that feels. This awareness is a field, rather than any particular object. It can widen to receive all phenomena which we are conscious of. It receives the perceptions and feelings that arise from the body, emotions and thoughts, and it 'knows' them directly. You could say it's like water in that it ripples with the energies of the whole system.

In this exercise we don't go into any mental state or body energy in depth, but support a balanced attention to how they interact and co-arise. We maintain a holistic awareness, rather than attend to any point in particular. While remaining calm and uninvolved, and without probing into anything in particular, note the flow of mental objects that arise. (You may even find it helpful to practise this with the eyes open and the gaze relaxed.)

This holistic awareness brings a sense of spaciousness. The extent to which there's a sense of spaciousness is a sign that the energy of the mind's awareness is not latching on to the mind's topics or moods. At first, there may be a straggle of half-formed thoughts that go nowhere special. It should be relatively easy to witness this flow and to step back from it; don't allow yourself to be that bothered one way or another. Notice the moment of recognition of a thought, of coming out of being involved with it. Notice also how you step back from that thought – try to let the stepping back proceed naturally, as a readjustment from the recognition rather than as a judgement that you shouldn't be thinking.

*In this exercise we're not trying to stop thinking.* Instead, amplify the sense of stepping back by widening your focus and taking an interest in the feel and the movement of the thought-form (rather than the topic) that you are stepping back from. Some thoughts may be like smoke, some like sparks, some slow and grinding like a machine, some high-pitched and streaming.

Avoid censoring thoughts; let them unwind and keep noting their feel and movement. Notice also the 'feel' of recognition and its spaciousness. Explore that spacious quality; notice that it isn't hard or reactive. Imagine it to be something like a very wide and deep feather bed able to receive whatever lands on it in an accommodating way.

However, if you feel overwhelmed by thoughts, strengthen the underpinnings of that bed by means of mindful reference to the body; take some long slow breaths and breathe through the thoughts. Either way, respond to the energy of any mental process by softening or relaxing your awareness of it. As you feel more balanced, that confidence will support the intention to be open to the next moment, a moment at a time. The theme here is: *widen your awareness, soften the energy.*

From time to time, thoughts which are more fully formed and deeply felt may arise, thoughts that link into mental processes that are like high-speed trains to reactive places. In these there's little or no space. You may find yourself rehashing an event of the day, or speculating about the future with some anxiety or eager expectation. These images or perceptions may lead on to reflections about yourself – as being busy, under pressure, an important person or flawed. There may well be another person who is the topic of your thoughts. However, just hold the question: Is this image really who I am? Don't I change? And in what state of mind am I reviewing my actions? And further: is this perception really who he or she is – always? From what perspective is my mind viewing them? Or maybe even creating them? In this way, put any activity other than a steady enquiry on hold. The theme here is: *question the assumption and challenge the view.*

Self, other, future and past: Do these directions on the mental map lead to suffering or not? Is there any way they could not? However, don't try to stop the process or erase the map. Just review it for what it is, rather than follow its pointers. Notice the charge, the energy, spin or pressure that the process is wrapped up in. Notice how that affects your body – which will probably tighten in the chest, or throat and head. Widen and

soften your bodily sense, letting the mind rest back into awareness of your body. Sustain balance by widening the focus to include any bodily impressions – such as warmth, pulse-rate, breathing – or any areas of your body that come into awareness as the thoughts move through. Remember that non-reactive recognition is the door to spaciousness.

Support this recognition by noting the feel and the movement of the process-train: its speed, its pull, sinking or flaring. Notice the ‘you’ that these more charged thought-processes create; he or she will probably be quite familiar, a common character in your personal story. There may be themes of feeling excited or rejected; or of feeling cheated from what you felt entitled to, or of feeling somehow incomplete and unresolved. There may be feelings of being trapped and wishing to escape, or of feeling that you’re brimming with light. Challenge such views. Check the process from going further by ‘photographing’ that person. What does he or she look like? What does his or her voice sound like? Can you maintain a steady presence with them?

Practise accepting the presence of this person. It may amount to forgiveness, sympathy or something like taking them under your wing – without trying to change or understand them in any way. Notice the effect of that. Notice that your sense of that person boils down to one or two sets of behaviour. See this sense of whom they are as conditioned, partly by the other person and partly by your own mind. Continue being mindful and equanimous towards that whole phenomenon – in which you may acknowledge by now elements of your own anxiety, dependency or defence. Don’t follow its trajectory, but do study its appearance.

Get a feel for how all this affects your body. Notice which areas of your body seem more charged: it could be around the eyes, or elsewhere in the head; it could be in the throat, chest or abdomen. Maybe there are lines of sensation running down your neck and into your shoulders. Widen your span of attention around these areas so that the line of energy is central, but you are aware of the whole area around that zone. If you can, widen the attention to the space immediately around the body, without losing

the central point. Practise being receptive and still; don't try to change or understand anything. Sweep your attention very slowly between the charged zone, its periphery and the quality of the awareness, as if you are very slowly allowing their energies to mix and merge.

Keep checking in with the interplay of energy and view: of how mental processes spark off views of self and other, and how those have an effect on energy. As we experience 'should be,' 'always have to,' as the mind rehashes the past and conjures up ideas of other people, everything tightens up and speeds up. Rather than engage with that, check that process: widen, soften and let the energies be released into the feather bed of awareness. Tune in to the quality of that holistic awareness; it's expansive, a field with no definite point, steady and supple. Take that in and dwell on it. Get a feel for the emotional tone of that field-awareness.

Practise this for half an hour or more. Conclude by sharing blessings with the 'inner persons' you have met in the practice session, wishing them well.



## **Difficulties**

The apparent softness of this exercise belies the fact that it does require a solid foundation in mindfulness. A firm frame of reference is needed, so that the mental processes don't take over. This firmness can be established and from time to time reestablished with practices such as mindfulness of breathing, or mindfulness of the bodily posture.

You may find yourself getting interested in the stories that the mind brings up and add more commentaries or details to them. Arrest that process when you can. Look out for the recognition moment that wants to step out of the story. That point when it *wants* to step out of the story may, at this time, be the optimal place for awakening and self-acceptance. That point where the mind has had enough of adding more is the easiest or most accessible link to break in the chain of thoughts.

Some trains of thought are almost too embarrassing or painful to contemplate. Again, don't force things. Look for the place where the mind will settle – although this might be in a place where your self-image feels unclean or stupid. If it's manageable, that's a good place to practise. Kindness is always appropriate. Kindness, openness and equanimity, if sustained as intentions, will replace the negative sources of these mental processes. You'll find that the more you are cool and open, the less intense is the mind-stuff that happens.

You may find yourself trying to be equanimous before fully feeling or allowing a self-image to form from the train of thoughts. This will weaken the process and implant the suggestion that you have come to terms with a memory when in fact you haven't. Give it time – no one is genuinely equanimous before going through the waves of mental feeling. Moreover, going through them will lead you to the significant realization of dependent arising. In other words, you'll notice that self-image arises dependent on mind-states, mind-states arise dependent on activities, and activities arise dependent on the absence of a direct and full awareness. The Awakening of that awareness – rather than the reinstatement of self in the guise of an equanimous self – is the aim of this practice.

To counterbalance the tendency to get bogged down in afflictive memories, cultivate deliberate reflections of gratitude for others' kindness, or for the relative health and freedom that one has.



### **If this form doesn't help you....**

The listening skills of a wise friend, counsellor or therapist may add another person's awareness to the process and provide the necessary support.

## Further

Deliberately bring to mind the memory of a positive experience you've had. Distil the felt meaning of it – of feeling empowered, loved, free or at ease. Steady your awareness of this state; widen and relax any further production of thoughts and feelings. At the same time, release the inclination to be separate from the thoughts by handling them willingly. Let your awareness of a train of thought be like spreading out a feather bed as deep as the earth and gladly letting mental processes jump and then relax into it. Rest in that bed of the heart.

Then investigate the energies and the images that triggered and sustained that memory.

Do the same with a negative scenario you've been through. Bring to mind any times of being blamed and work with what arises from that. Finally come back to the present and how or who you seem to be now. What is triggering and sustaining the present impression? What would it be without this? Recognize that part of you, your witnessing awareness, is already apart from this.

Consider a project that you have in mind, or a plan for the future – how does that make you feel? How does the uncertainty of it affect you? What if, as is likely, it doesn't turn out the way you expect it to? What energies, images or intentions are you relying on? Are they utterly reliable?

Consider a scenario, a stage of life, job or relationship that you've been through. What moods come up with that? Bring awareness to that in accordance with the practice outlined above.

How about a summary of your life? Good? Bad? Some of both, I imagine. So is there any final statement you could make about it? Or isn't a mood, a heart-response of spaciousness the more relevant response? When you have that spacious feather bed, look at any evocative details from that place. What kind of response happens then?



Read a letter that's been addressed to you personally. Notice the movement of the emotions that pass through you. How does the author of the letter seem to you? How do you sense yourself in the light of their remarks? Rest in awareness of that.

Try the same practice with a phone call, and eventually during a conversation. In such a scenario, a tip is to widen your listening to include awareness of other background sounds (or silence) when you or the other person speaks. This will enable your mind to be less reactive.



Recall a particular view that you hold strongly – political or ethical, something that you sense as important, or a scenario of injustice. Notice what happens in your body, particularly around the heart, eyes, forehead and temples. See if you can shift back to the body and smooth through these areas. This doesn't mean trying to change or comment on your point of view, but noticing the process of forming a view; how your whole sense of being and selfhood gets formed in relationship to that point of view. It's not about not having a point of view, but about allowing that to sit within something bigger and 'less pointy.'

Is there a way to consider the topic that is of concern to you while lessening or steadying the bodily effect? Does that add to or broaden your point of view?



Remember that apart from any healing this may bring about in your own heart/mind, the aim here is to exercise direct non-reactive knowing. This is the natural knowing that emanates from awareness. It gives us the capacity and the resources to be with all manner of mental and physical processes that our thoughts and emotions can't manage. By accessing this direct knowing and by referring to the field of awareness, energies can untangle and views of self, other, future and past fade into the here and now.

## Releasing the Body

The initial aim of the following exercise is to open and relax the body, and therefore allow its energy to come out of being contracted, overactive or stale. It may also bring emotions to the surface, enabling them to release. The result is an increase in calm and well-being, an enhanced receptivity to the breath-energy and a development in the factor of investigation.

When investigation is used as a basis for insight, it provides a way of distinguishing between sensations (physical, such as pressure, temperature or movement), energies (qualities of vitality, tingling, flushes) and feeling; this can help to discharge compounded tension and associated mind-states. Investigation also reveals the characteristics of change and non-self, and brings the mind into a dispassionate and steady awareness.

A subsequent contemplation then becomes possible: with this dispassionate awareness, the activity of contact (of how we ‘know’ our body) is calmed and eased. It’s not a matter of ignoring or suppressing bodily experience. But instead, through not placing ourselves in a habitual pattern of bodily energy, there is a liberating effect.



This exercise can be practised whilst sitting, standing or reclining. The standing posture offers the advantage of taking pressure off the spine and allowing the lumbar muscles to relax; however one should ideally sustain the posture for at least thirty minutes. Try it! If you take up a balanced

position with the knees and buttocks relaxed and the arms slightly away from the sides of the body, the weight of the body can transfer through the legs and down to the ground, and not much muscular effort is needed. Sitting is good too, but in this posture, the body below the waist is less accessible. Reclining offers an openness which can assist relaxation – but of course that can lead you into sleep.

Begin by spending a few minutes centring and steadying the mind by connecting to the rhythmic process of breathing in and out. Then focus on the axis of the spine, and how the head, shoulders and pelvis connect to that. Relax in those places. You might also begin with loosening in the arm-sockets, and dropping your shoulders. If you're standing you can then relax the buttocks and the tail of the spine. This will bring around a sense of 'dropping the spine' that will help to relax the neck. Softening in the jaw, throat, eye-sockets, forehead and temples will then allow the occiput, the small gap between the top of the neck and the skull, to open. You may get a sense for your scalp and its sensitivity to the space above your head. Rest in that open awareness, widening the focus to include the whole body and the space immediately around it. By this, I mean that you can sense the skin and that there is no pressure on it. Be aware of that sense of spaciousness.

Establish the sense of the whole body as if your awareness is loosely wrapped around it. Don't go into details at this time, just settle on the overall sense of the body at peace and open to the space around it. Notice the quality of the physical sensations such as the pressure in the feet or the buttocks, or those sensations caused by stiffness or discomfort. Then you might note the warmth or the pulses and tingles that tell you 'this is your body.' If you tune in to these signs of vitality, you may also pick up other energies, especially in the palms of the hands, or the head. Notice the degree of pleasant or unpleasant feeling. Use this way of reference to set up a form of awareness that rests on the body, but isn't involved with it or trying to change it.

When that is established bring your awareness (that is, direct your attention) to the top of the head as if that awareness is like a loose-fitting cap. Feel the top of the skull as an entirety, with its textures and pulses. Distinguish, if you can, sensations (such as the warmth or coolness of the skin) from energies (most obviously associated with the pulses in the temples) and feelings – agreeable or disagreeable. Energies may be associated with sensations but extend beyond them – you may sense them as tones of tension or activity or vitality. Notice also any emotions that come up. Keep your awareness as if it's outside and resting on the head rather than inside and exploring. As it feels suitable, move your awareness in slow strokes over this part of your head, noticing any changes in sensation, energy and feeling. Incline towards a clear and conscious relaxation.

Focus on the texture of this part of your body. Imagine that it is becoming softer, gradually turning from bone to flesh. Then from flesh to something more like jelly. Then to water; then to a spacious ether that mixes with the quality of awareness and takes in its gentle steadiness. This process should take several minutes. Notice as you go through it any effects in terms of sensations, energies and feelings. You may also notice that your perception of your head, its size or shape, changes – it may feel larger, softer, more round or smooth. Witness any emotional content or changes in mood. Stay with this area as you get a sense of its changes. Finally, as things calm and unify, let the quality of the energy and the quality of the awareness blend.

Then continue this process through the whole body. As you move from one zone to the next check in for a few moments with breathing in and out; when that feels steady, move on. If you don't have much time, at least try to proceed through the head and throat and down over the front of the chest. However much you cover, in whatever detail, always conclude by widening your awareness to cover your entire body and reestablishing its boundaries and central axis.

The next zone is the band around the head that includes the forehead, the eyes in their sockets, the temples and round to the occiput. Move your awareness in slow strokes that spread out from the centre of the forehead and on around. Then circle around the eyes; then circle in each temple. After this initial sweep, rest awareness on the zone as a whole, transforming from hard to soft and mixing with the quality of awareness, noting sensations, energies, feelings and perceptions as before.

The subsequent zones are:

- the lower head, sweeping down over the cheeks, around the corners of the mouth and down through the floor of the mouth;
- the throat and neck, moving awareness around the area from front to back;
- from the throat notch down over the front of the chest;
- around the ribcage, paying attention to the areas on the side of the body under the arms - sweep from the centre of the chest around to the spine;
- the upper abdomen: the area of the diaphragm down to the navel;
- the lower abdomen: from the navel on down over the pubis, and then around to the lumbar region and down over the buttocks.

It's good to conclude by sweeping down each leg and into the underarch of each foot.

When you have completed this part of the exercise, widen your awareness to spread over the whole body and reestablish the boundaries and the central axis.

Finally, contemplate the quality of your awareness. Incline towards resting in awareness, with no aim other than to drink in its spaciousness.



You may not have time to work through the whole body in one session. Aim for a balanced coverage: begin and return with awareness of the whole body and lessen the detail. Don't get fixated on one area, and as the quality of intention – the mental attitude – affects the body's energies,

keep it light, non-intense and not aimed at making anything happen. Keep your awareness attending from 'outside' and don't go into the body or attempt to adjust its energies. The attitude behind this exercise is one of allowing energies to wake up or adjust by themselves. As bodily data quieten down, this awareness becomes your primary focus, so keep it calm and non-intrusive.



## Walking through Space

As an alternative, practise walking meditation with your awareness around your body, as if you are walking through some subtle medium and can feel it against your skin. Try to sense the quality of that medium – or how your body perceives it. This may be more as a sense of space or energy rather than any obvious sensation. There may be no specific sense, but setting up that enquiry helps to keep your body energy from contracting and your mental energy from spinning out. It's also likely that turning your attention in this way will have a helpful effect on your bodily sense.

Contemplate the range of sensations that arise – either due to temperature or to physical contact. Then sense how these feel; sense what energies co-arise and notice any involuntary response to any feeling. These responses are energies; once you're aware of them, notice the felt and energetic response when you look ahead of you. Then notice the response when you soften your gaze and let it rest on the space an arm's length in front of you. How does that focus affect your mind?

Extend your awareness – or draw it back – to fill this bubble of space that extends an arm's length around you. It's easiest to experience in front of you, but you also can widen your sense of personal space to the sides. Let your arms come slightly away from your body. When you come to standing at the end of your path, try to imagine the space behind you – as if there's a warm fire or a good friend behind you. Notice the effects – you may experience energies shifting, a change of bodily sense and even emotional ease.

As you develop this, let the boundary of the body relax into the space immediately around it as if the skin is loosening and even dissolving. As the bodily sensations subside, or no longer trigger any mental activity, rest in awareness.

Conclude with standing and centring the body from the feet up along the central axis. You may also reorient by gently swinging the body in a semicircle from one side to the other.



## **Difficulties**

You may locate areas where the energy seems quite intense, or is echoed by strong emotion. Although the instinct may be to look into that, don't. The rule is – if it's intense, stay with it but stay outside it. The principle of this practice is to get your awareness to widen, soften and spread around and over an area. This provides a space in which energies can be revealed, unwind and release at their own rate. As they do so, the process calms and releases the tendencies that are in awareness. As a strong tendency is to want to get results quickly, or make something happen, letting the process work at its own speed is an important part of releasing awareness from its programming. As intention (the 'mental muscle' that enquires and otherwise moves the mind) and attention (the mental action that frames awareness) are both programmed activities, they add their energy to whatever they contact. When your aim is to allow energy to unfold, you want to add as little to that as possible, and certainly not to add an intense or narrowing focus.

The aim of this practice is not to work on chakras, auras or subtle energies, but to let the body open up and feel whole. Work on these more subtle areas should be done under the guidance of an experienced teacher.

If you feel abrupt changes in your energy, rate of breathing or heartbeat, widen and refer to the whole body. Ground yourself along the spinal axis down through the feet. Focus on breathing and slow it down to strengthen

its energy. Refer to the physical body – if necessary by slowly stroking the body with your hands. It may be helpful to move and look around.



### **If this form doesn't help you....**

Qi Gong or Tai Chi are helpful ways of opening and steadying your body energy. Remember it's not essential to experience strong energies, shifts or emotional releases. The essential aim is to use this exercise to steady awareness and let go of its programs – including the program that is about doing and not being able to do. So keep it simple and trust your experience.



### **Further**

Connect this more fully to the breath energy by focusing on an area and then widening your attention to include the breathing. So in a way, when you are focusing on your eyes, you are 'breathing through your eyes.' Make no effort to push the breath or cause anything to happen; a general attitude of kindness and spaciousness is always relevant.

Aim for a steady and unbroken flow of awareness and energy. As awareness and the energy blend, the experience of body becomes subtle and non-physical. It will open into a 'field' or 'sphere,' a domain rather than any particular point or feature. Contemplate the domain with its changing flows and whatever perceptions (such as light or space or warmth) arise. Be aware of these, inclining towards dispassion and letting go. Keep returning to this bodily field, noting any disturbances and smoothing them out into the field. Notice also the absence of disturbances and the cool spaciousness of resting in that.



## Theory: Release

*This is peaceful, this is sublime – that is, the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of all substructure, the destruction of craving, dispassion, Nibbāna. [A.10.60]*

In Buddhist practice there's an emphasis on release. 'Release': the very word suggests the happiness that comes from getting out of prison, or out of a trap – a happiness that comes not from adding something, but with the removal of an obstacle and a return to a fuller way of being. The implication also is that most of us are trapped for some or all of the time – which would be a miserable realization if there weren't a way out. However, the Buddha says that there is a way out and that it can be learned. This way out, this release, is synonymous with the aim of Dhamma practice: the ceasing of suffering and stress.

And yet there are certain things that bind all beings, including Buddhas: they get sick and die, their senses degenerate with age, and they experience pain and hardship. Even the Buddha had enemies who tried to kill him. He had to deal with rebellions and corruptions in his monastic Order. He lived with chronic back problems, and he died of dysentery under a tree. So what are Awakened Beings released from that means they don't suffer with the grit of life? In simple terms, the minds of Awakened Ones are not shaken by bodily decline and painful feelings. How that happens is through not taking a stand on or clinging to the presence or absence of the body-mind system with its thoughts, feelings, impulses and all that these entail. In a nutshell, the practice of release entails ceasing

to experience in terms of a substructure of self (*upadhi*), that what goes on is mine: in me, about me, of me, or apart from the true me.

Obviously, in order to find a way of release, we first have to be clear as to what mind is and how it's stuck. We've already looked at mind as a thinker, as a place of emotions and responses, and as a witnessing awareness. Witnessing awareness is the important one that you become more familiar with as you meditate: mind as a 'watcher,' as a sense of presence that can experience mental activities without necessarily engaging in them. This mind-base, which we also call 'awareness,' is the seat of the direct knowing (*abhiññā*) of any experience. The most obvious stuck bit is what the mind's awareness finds itself witnessing. Our thoughts, emotions and attitudes may not seem that stuck – in fact they change and move along pretty nimbly. But as we deepen our witnessing, we realize that they run down established pathways of self-interest, ranging from personal concerns and responsibilities to personal appetites and fixed attitudes.

These pathways run through work and pleasure, through perceptions of oneself and relationships with others. The mind develops such patterns around everything because patterns make things easier; and in that, the activity of contact 'knows' where to place sensory and mental impressions. Great. We see a car and we know it's not a wild monster but an inanimate machine that we can drive. And yet the heart's impressions of that sense-contact can be woefully inaccurate: 'That car looked like it was a bargain, but after I bought it, I found out it was a wreck.' Moreover, our intentions get skewed by expectation or dread about the future, and by small addictions and phobias that were formed in the past that we can't seem to shake. We feel we should be able to meaningfully work out our destiny and yet we get thwarted by illness, financial restraints or global upheavals. In the present, our attention places us as the witnesses of a reality to which we belong – until with a wrench comes separation and loss. In brief, (as we reviewed in the section on **Kamma**) you can't rely on assumptions and their activities to get you out of stress.

All these conditions in our minds and in the larger world around us are subject to change, are not entirely under our control, and provide no lasting satisfaction. And still we operate from the learned attitudes and ways of doing things that we assume will support us: that is — get rid of, acquire, or work for a new thing, place, or position and you'll be fine. That's the underlying, stuck assumption that holds the rest in place. It's the substructure of experience, one that claims self as its centre. It's experienced both as a view, a reference to the sense of self, and an energy, which ranges from subtle tension to powerful clinging.

The view is the most fundamental; it's the view of ignorance and being out of touch with the deep peace of non-clinging, the Unconditioned. From this viewpoint, it seems that life would be miserable without being able to gain happiness from causes and conditions. As long as we don't 'know' the Unconditioned, we must cling to as good of a condition as we can find. Hence the tension, need and defence. Not that it's immoral or stupid. Indeed, as we practise Dhamma, we do experience great benefits from developing intentions like mindfulness and kindness, from skilful contact with the inner body and from deep attention. In terms of conditions, these are the best things going.

In this respect, Dhamma-practice is a re-education in terms of cause and effect; we get to know how to feel fine through clarity, mindfulness and self-respect. But there's more to it than that. As one develops the skill of witnessing, this base of awareness presents a possibility of release from causes and conditions. It gets us in touch with aware non-activity, which is an *unshakeable peace just because it isn't founded on any changeable activity*. So what's that? Well, we've already touched into it. For example, when the mind stops re-hashing the past, planning the future, spinning out stories about oneself or others, it gets peaceful. This gives us the hint that to work towards lessening activities (eventually even the good ones), rather than developing more, is the way to deep peace. But this doesn't come about through the activity of aversion!

Accordingly, one of the main themes for instruction is to bring mindful awareness onto our emotional and psychological activities in order to

notice how they are and where they go. The consequent Insight-wisdom notices, well, they change and they're not ultimately reliable. It doesn't deny the relative skill or validity of thoughts and responses, but notices the pressure, compulsion and identity-making in those activities. So insight that is based on a calm and direct knowing deepens into dispassion and equanimity. Insight leads out of the pressure and the I-making. And it leads on to ceasing, that is, to just being a still witness rather than adding more thoughts and emotions to the mix. This already is a lessening of activities. And far from bringing around dullness or deprivation, this ceasing enables us to see things afresh, to enquire into our attitudes and allow new ways to develop. We see how we can step back from our habits, how we can gladden the mind and experience contentment in the here and now. Consequently the mind's awareness becomes brighter and steadier, and a source of ease.

So this is how the process goes. Each time we skilfully still an afflictive activity, we wake up a bit more. In this process, even the urge to subtler or more sublime meditative states or greater precision has to be checked. 'Good enough' seems to be one of the most difficult views for humans to get to! Like the Mandelbrot set: there's some wonderful stuff out there, great places to go to, but it goes on...and on...When is it enough? Yet there is a key to unlock this craving; it's through insight into it and the activities that support it. This is synonymous with the relinquishment of the substructure of I-making. With that weight off the mind, direct knowing can ripen into full understanding (*pariññā*), the knowing that knows the release from becoming or taking a stand on anything.

### **The five-fold aggregate (*khandhā*)**

To summarize what the mind gets involved with also gives a model of what to work with. The model is a five-fold aggregate or collection (*khandhā*) of what gets clung to: it consists of form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), activities (*sankhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāna*). Firstly, the mind gets involved with form, particularly bodily form. Form interests, excites, disappoints and generally locates us: here I am in this body and there you are in that one. This shape is me, that shape is you – which is better, how are we going to get together and so on. However, as

we find out, form isn't all our felt meanings make it out to be. In fact, as we noticed in exploring the elements, form isn't a solid thing at all.

Now although there certainly is a body, the sense of ownership and location within it, along with how one feels about that, is learned, or programmed. It's '*sankhāra*'d. This bodily learning senses the size of the body, whether it can get through a door, whether things are within its reach, and other norms. Try folding your arms in the way you normally do, then unfold and fold them again using the opposite configuration. If you're right-handed, try brushing your teeth using your left hand (or vice versa). Weird isn't it? This 'felt body' norm is called a bodily 'schema' – it's the map of channels which bodily activity has created and become habituated to. This bodily schema is a pattern that's programmed into consciousness.

Even more fundamental is the program of identification with the body, of feeling oneself to be in a body for a lifetime with the limitations of that. It takes newborn babies a while to get to know that this concoction of shapes relates to certain feelings and can be operated by their will, but the program of identification with the body is there, ready to download the details. Even then, although the mind can learn to inhabit and operate this system, its control over the body is always partial. At times of disability or intoxication we radically lose that function. And when we sleep, or at times in meditation, we don't necessarily stay within the bodily domain. So this body-schema isn't what we are or even where we are; it's where we've 'learned' to be. The default assumption is: I am this body, I'm in this body, this body is mine. Release is ultimately release from that activity of identification, from an unconscious substructure that set us up as being a solid, held thing.

Another aggregate of experience that locates and moves us is feeling – the quality of pleasure, pain or neutrality that occurs. Again, this is programmed. Just feel the jump away from the painful, or the rising up to take in the pleasant: automatic, isn't it? Consider the relative pleasure or discomfort around the experience of 'cold' between an inhabitant of

the Arctic and one in the tropics. The fickle nature of feeling is even more evident when we review mentally-based feelings, which are based on perceptions of the seen, heard, tasted, smelt and thought. It's quite rare to get even two people to agree on the pleasurability of a taste, or a piece of music. Our own feelings in these areas may change over time. Much the same is apparent around perceptions or felt meanings; 'polite,' 'beautiful,' 'amusing' and all the rest are all programmed and changeable. Animated discussion can feel rude in one cultural setting, and friendly in another. And yet we're moved by all of this; feeling and perception steer the mind.

The activities of wanting, aiming, comparing or rejecting experience all form another set of programs that we're very much involved with. On this psychological level, life-messages of how welcome or competent we are get concocted out of 'learning' who we are dependent on other people's approval – or lack of it. These psychological schemas, including senses of unworthiness, entitlement and perfectionism, can be triggered by events in the present (someone's left us out of an invitation); or they can arise in meditation. After a period of calming, it's often the case that these programs get busy, creating our stories and building a self in their image.

Of all activities, a basic one is the turning of the mind towards a sense-base – seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. This is consciousness. Furthermore, the program of mind-consciousness is to report on sense-data through perceptions and feelings – what this shape reminds me of, whether that sound is threatening or comforting. The mind-consciousness is programmed to be busy. Like a radar station, an inactive mind-consciousness may be disastrous in terms of our normal daily activities. So the mind feeds or relies on perceptions, feelings and its own activities. It has thoughts and images to tabulate and define what's going on – but how much of that activity depends on what's out there? We can close the eyes, plug up the ears and nose, float in warm saline and otherwise remove the input – but the mind will still keep generating thoughts, perceptual images and emotions. Meanwhile, either through chemicals, sleep deprivation or neurological impairment, we can hear,

see and touch things that ‘aren’t there.’ The activity gets compulsive; it’s a kind of addiction or ‘clinging’ (*upādāna*) that fills up an inactivity that we wish for as peace, yet dread as an inner emptiness.

Moreover, despite all this activity, it’s also striking that a lot of the time we don’t notice what’s going on around or within us. This action of bringing something into our presence, this consciousness, isn’t a sure thing at all. It’s programmed in terms of seeking and noting what is useful, agreeable, threatening and the rest. It’s programmed to be a self-interest search-engine. So that’s *sankhāra* again — programs which limit responsive awareness to a certain range of stimuli. Attention and contact are the programs that present an apparent world that then moves and grips us.

So this five-fold aggregate is all programmed and affected by clinging. And release is the release from the clinging programs. That is, we’re not attempting to not feel or have a body, but to undo the afflictive activities of worry, conceit, craving and ill will. And in tandem with this, the identification program, the substructure of self, can be relinquished. So release doesn’t mean that this five-fold system has to stop – it’s the life-program. But there’s a cultivation of awareness that passes through its intermeshing activities. And also, when it’s appropriate to engage the aggregate system, there’s the possibility to not get compulsive about it, to not define oneself in terms of that. In fact, not to need to form oneself at all. Because as soon as you identify, go into or experience yourself as anything – historical, subtle, sublime or afflicted – it’s going to be in terms of these five *khandhā*, and they’re not ownable, controllable, or lasting. It’s this habit of identification with them that we then need to, and can, let go of. Then, when consciousness rests from activities, release, the realization of the unprogrammed or Unconditioned, can occur.

## **Release is through calm and insight**

As programs and programming are the constant within the *khandhā* experience, the focus for release is on them as they arise in body or mind.

As we've seen before, activities or programs occur through three channels: body, verbal/conceptual and mind/heart. And we've made use of the fact that these activities cross the body/mind boundary. That is, the way one's mental activities run affects the body activity; whether we feel angry or frightened or relaxed there are corresponding bodily and mental effects. Therefore, the basic patterns that afflict or gladden the mind can be sensed, released or steadied within the bodily activities. The theme of practice can therefore be summarized as *'soften (or relax) the energy; challenge the view.'*

In terms of energy, as one cultivates mindfulness of breathing, the initial process is one of gathering attention around the rhythm of breathing, steadying it around one point, and then tracing the movement of breath-energy throughout the entire body. This 'remaps' our perception of the body to one that is based on the direct experience of the energy system rather than what is inferred through seeing it. This is a big shift of view that releases the mind from all kinds of preoccupations.

This process is holistic and relies on an awareness that keeps all three bases of activities in balance. So although we may work on the bodily sense, how we do that involves the mind/heart activity and that must be kept in balance with the body. Then as we bring bodily and mental activities into harmony, what arises is a unified 'field' of calm and ease that is a mixture of body and mental energies. Even undertaking the process is remedial and gladdening: it brings us into a non-judgemental meeting of body and mind where wilfulness and indifference are both discarded. Then, even without affecting a final release, so many unskillful activities and programs are abolished that one achieves a peaceful and clear way of being. This is the process of calm; it's to do with *energy*.

The process of insight is made possible by bringing bodily and mental activities into unification in this way. But insight is a development of *view* rather than of *energy*. It's a development of discernment; it aims to separate rather than unify. Calm is like picking a variety of fruit and blending them into one juice. Insight is like taking that juice and



discerning its various characteristics of colour, flavour and viscosity. In this way we know the juice to be a compound of various appearances. The juice isn't just its flavour, colour or viscosity alone, nor can the full juice experience be obtained without one of these; so 'juice' is not one thing at all, but a matter of appearances, each of which is subject to change. The nature of juice is that it neither ultimately exists as an unchanging single thing, nor can it be said to not exist. This is a major shift of view. In Buddhist parlance, it's expressed as 'all phenomena are "empty" of an abiding essence.' Recognition of this emptiness releases the mind from clinging to or rejecting phenomena; deep peace and wisdom arrive with this non-clinging.

However, insight doesn't contradict calm – in fact, you can only discern the characteristics of the juice when you have pressed the fruit together. But its effect is one of dispassion and seeing through the appearance of what manifests, rather than of making the manifest calm and steady.

Within the domain of a composed consciousness, insight notes body, feeling, perception and activities. Like the aspects of the above juice, we experience ourselves and the world, on any level of consciousness, as a compound of these. Meditative absorptions refine the bodily experience to one of a subtle non-physical body, and may even ripen into formlessness; however, absorptions themselves are associated with subtle perceptions and feelings, and refined activities (such as mindfulness), and they establish particular stations of consciousness. Therefore, they alone don't offer a final release from consciousness with its 'me, mine' program. So the aim of insight is not to develop the trajectory of refined absorptions, a trajectory that may even support clinging to refined states. Instead, the progress of insight is in terms of dispassion and relinquishment; in other words it's about a successive reduction in activities – in order to release the underlying activity of clinging. This reduction comes around not through aversion or any destructive intent, but through the deep understanding of the compounded, changeable and 'empty' nature of the aggregates. As this is understood, the fascination

with and dependency on feelings, perceptions and psychological activities gradually abates. It's through this deepening dispassion that there is an abandonment of clinging.

To bring around this penetrative understanding of the aggregates, investigation separates them. Or more specifically, it separates the body from the immaterial aggregates, and within the immaterial domain, discerns activities as separate from perception and feeling. Insight questions any view of solid state or lasting self. For example, with regard to people, we can learn to separate the image of 'that person who was so rude to me yesterday' from the activity of anger. Then, through widening the focus and holding the anger in a field of steady equanimous awareness, the mind can discern the activity of anger as separate from its triggering perception. With firm concentration it can also check the arising of further activities – such as going into some victim story, or into a guilt program around anger. When we address the anger by grounding and calming it in bodily awareness, the negative perception doesn't get its food, so it tends to fade. We see that the person in my story is compounded through my mental aggregates. It's not that the person is a complete fantasy (although my perception of them may be distorted by my own biases), but that the 'person' is empty of an unchanging, absolute essence. What this means in daily life terms is that we're no longer living in the courtroom of right and wrong, but in an educational program for Awakening.

An important point to note is the widening of the span of attention to maximise the application of awareness. Awareness is the receptive and empathic intelligence; attention is that which frames a topic or theme. Often meditators begin with strengthening and steadying their attention by focusing on a single point; using this helps to purify the mind of unskilful or unnecessary content. Then a process of widening can take place, as in breathing through the entire body and so on. The central focus is not discarded, but peripheral factors are also noted in the wider field. These may include awareness of the attitude with which I'm meditating,

or of the overall effect that holding the focus has on the body's energies. These peripheral factors are actually significant, and without an ability to widen, the mind gets obsessive, fixated and prone to dogmatic views. Field-awareness thus reveals the interdependent arising of the bodily and mental *khandhā*, and at what point clinging and stress arise. Seeing this, one can see how the clinging and stress can cease. This is release.

Mindfulness of breathing, which brings the aggregates into focus in terms of the factors of Awakening, is declared by the Buddha to be an adequate process for complete release. Even so, because release is holistic, most practitioners will also benefit from supporting that practice with other means, ones that may bring a full heart-sense into mindfulness, for example. Kindness, spaciousness and empathy are always a support and need to be developed. A further beauty of Dhamma-practice is its breadth: we can cultivate calm and insight wherever there is the skill of investigating the aggregates. Once you can tune into those, through skilful attention and awareness you can include daily-life activities as well as meditation in your practice.

Please note with regard to meditative processes that the concept of 'intense practice' will have often harmful and unbalancing effects if acted upon. If you experience shifts of energy that dramatically alter your perceptions of yourself or of the world, if your sleep rhythms radically shift, if your 'inner world' becomes compelling or you seem to be receiving messages from a further realm – you should withdraw from introspection for a while, and reorient through mindful contact with wise people and simple daily activities.

## Contemplation of the Aggregates

Because the preceding section on the aggregates may be difficult to assimilate, I've added below a few practical guidelines on attuning to this way of seeing things. You're invited to use any or all of these meditations, ideally giving them twenty to thirty minutes. I recommend you go through them in sequence, as they are presented.

Working with the immaterial aggregates may feel disorienting, so begin with contemplating form. You might practise with this for a few periods over a week or two before moving on.



In any experience, there is the experience of **form** – which is often visual form, but can also mean tactile, or the presence of any object as it arises in the senses (even sound has a ‘form’ which ‘strikes’ the ear). So when you touch a doorknob, sit on a chair or see something with your eyes, notice that a form has arisen. Here it's useful to review the experience of form in terms of elements. For a few moments sustain mindfulness of the form – the mass, vitality, movement or shape – as an aggregate of these elemental properties. Let form just be form, acknowledging the feeling, perception or activities it evokes, but suspending giving attention to these. For instance, you may acknowledge that the chair feels agreeable, that it gives rise to the perception of a solid reliable support and that you feel inclined to lean back in it. But first be mindful of the form, and let the other aggregates arise without engaging in them.

If it's a person you see, again, hold to the visual impression of a form occupying visual space (hence earth) with a shape (water). You might find that shape pleasing or not. You might recognize that person and wish to greet them. Acknowledge all this as feeling and perception and activity without engaging in it. Relax the mind for a few moments on the simple perception of form, and notice the quality of your awareness. It will probably feel still. Perceiving form as form puts aside the felt meanings we may have about a person, a body or form in general. The contact-impression may be apprehensive or it may be eager. Rest on awareness of form as form, letting the relational energy quieten down. With the ceasing of the old contact impression, notice that the awareness is alert, relaxed and not making anything. This is an important reference. Tuning in to that, wait for a response to the experience of form, whether it's an emotion, or an intention, or even a realization of the changeable, empty nature of form.

Get up and walk around a little, feeling the impressions that arise with movement – sensations are subtle forms of brief duration, some creating qualities of feeling. Also there is energy, which is subtle form. It may feel warm or mobile, or (say in your back) quite stable. Notice the impression of temperature on your skin, which may feel pleasant or unpleasant. Notice how the body's energy moves and changes with coolness or chill, or with heat and humidity. Get a sense of the feeling that comes up with these, but focus on the tingling or movement of energy as a subtle form. Not good or bad, just subtle form. Contemplate the bodily activity of tightening up against the unpleasant, and relaxing into the pleasant; notice the mental activity of agitation, resistance or relaxation. Keep re-establishing your focus on the form as a form, as something that will change. Tune in to the direct knowing of that; it doesn't go into form, nor reject it, nor create something out of it. This is a ceasing of at least some activities around form – and the awareness is bright, spacious, not in, not apart, not locatable. This is what 'ceasing' is about with regard to contact.

When you go to eat something, notice the form of the food – its colours and shapes. Stay focused on that, while acknowledging any perceptions

of what the meal is (salad, stew, pie, etc.) or any inner comments on how appetising it is. Return to the visual form of the food, letting the other aggregates rise up, strengthen, change and wane. When things seem settled in full awareness, take a mouthful, noticing the arising of tastes and its perceptions (salty, sweet, etc.) along with the feeling and any mental activity – such as the urge to get the food swallowed promptly. Slow your eating down and contemplate how the taste form is different from the visual one, and how the perceptions and feelings change as you keep chewing. Try focusing on the physical sensation of chewing, the tactile form (which is generally not a high spot of eating). Consider – which of these experiences is ‘the meal’? Could there be a meal without these experiences? In this way we realize the emptiness of a meal; and the awareness of that, which is spacious, unopinionated and equanimous. Notice that you’re never far from that awareness if you sustain clarity as to what is going on.



You might subsequently like to focus on **perception**. Let’s start with the visual base for perception. Ideally choose something that’s not that dramatic – like a plate or a mug. Sit with it at a distance that’s comfortable for your eyes and your body so that you can sit still, and so you can see the object against a plain background, one that isn’t going to catch your attention. Don’t move or touch the object. As you hold it with a dispassionate awareness, not scrutinising details, but keeping the gaze gentle and steady – what is that thing? We can call it ‘plate’ or ‘mug’ – but over a period of ten or fifteen minutes, you’ll notice shape, texture, colour and perhaps details that you never noticed before which make that thing unique. After a while the generic term ‘plate’ or ‘mug’ doesn’t fit. Any one of these objects may become an ever-changing symphony of forms that are evocative and yet ephemeral. All you know is that whatever you perceive or conceive it as, it’s other than that. Eventually (if you keep this up) the labelling may stop altogether and there can be a sense of immanence in which the sense of being a separate observer dwindles. For moments it might even stop altogether.

Notice awareness at that point. Behaviours of desire or aversion are impossible; such intentions stop altogether. There's just the intention that supports attention.

You can then practise with perceptions that arise through hearing – say the sound of traffic, or of the heating/air conditioning, or of wind in the trees. Again it's better if it's not too evocative as the mind will be calmer and steadier if the sound is very ordinary. Hearing is a more emotionally affective experience than seeing, because it doesn't have the same distancing effect. Therefore choose something gentle and familiar and widen your awareness over it to include the silence around the sound. Don't get drawn into the sound but stay in touch with the silence. You may also from time to time include the breathing or another bodily reference if you feel ungrounded. Rest back into the whole of that sound/silence hearing field, letting the labelling of perception wind down as before. Keep gently working against the pull of attention to find a point in that field. Attention, the framing of a particular object, may cease altogether leaving a bright steady awareness.

Stay in touch with the quality of awareness; it may feel wide and steady. The sound may even disappear, and with it the silence. These discrete forms may blend into awareness, leaving a sense of stillness and gravity. So this is how consciousness 'ceases.' We're not unconscious, not unreceptive, not distracted; yet consciousness isn't going out through a sense door. There's no food out there, nothing to play with, so it stays at home. With the dispassionate ceasing of contact, attention and intention, there is the ceasing of consciousness; in this case the hearing consciousness. And as that stops, activities of mental consciousness – such as thinking – also quieten or stop. What may remain is a mood tone: this may shift through slight sadness, awe, rapture or mild elation to equanimity. It's likely also that the body energy will be strong and still.



Then focus on **feeling**: in any of the above, notice and turn your attention towards the feeling, the quality of pleasure or pain in any experience. If the feeling doesn't seem clear ask yourself whether you'd like to have more of this feeling, whether you'd like it to persist, or whether you'd rather it wasn't there. Then the reference may be defined accordingly as 'agreeable' or 'disagreeable.'

Contemplate the feeling as a phenomenon. It has no motivation, and yet from feeling, motivation (or volition, intention) arises. See if you can relax the intention and just be with the feeling as it changes.



Sit down for a while and notice what it's like to be aware. Notice the quality of that mental awareness. It may feel spacious, bright and untroubled, like a medium that is with but not impinged upon by sensations and feelings. This is **consciousness** when it is not going out or held in; it may feel joyful. Notice any inclination to turn in on that and dwell in it; that is, a subtle grasping. This is the root of the view, the self-view. Keep resting in that knowing, acknowledging and releasing the experience. It's just this.

Introduce a sight to your awareness, noticing any reactions or responses and letting them melt away. When you can do this with sights (which are quite 'distant') then practise with sounds, then touch. Eventually think something clearly and steadily, and notice the ripple and the melt. Where do things melt to? Where do thoughts arise from?

As you deepen into the experience of the changeability of what you are conscious of, rest in the coolness and openness of that.

Then turn the mind consciousness back on the witness. This is like looking for *who is aware*, or like gradually drawing back to the source of consciousness. You might also find that the sense of 'allowing myself to be seen/heard' takes you to this point. Relaxing the quality of investigation into appreciation is another tip. And finally, a classic way



to turn consciousness around is through the devotional sense – surrendering to the knowing that isn't fixated on anything. Every time you start knowing anything – time, place, mood, stillness – turn back on the witness of that. Who is 'knowing'? Enjoy the openness, the surrender.



## Difficulties

The form of this particular set of instructions is quite loose and open; it can help us to integrate insight into daily life. However, the drawback is that the setting isn't one of assured calm, with clear boundaries. This makes it more difficult to go deep. In terms of the exercise with consciousness, one will need a meditative setting. Also, the objects we're focusing on have drawbacks: they're relatively coarse (compared with breathing) and so the attention isn't that refined – it's difficult to keep it steady and rested. When using a visual gaze at a plate or mug, the eyes may get sore or water.

Nevertheless, over time such contemplations establish a sense of vigilance and a recognition of what the awareness feels like when form is held as form, and, on the other hand, when the mind gets activated by it.



## Further

These exercises help to prepare the mind for practising the ensuing set of instructions for mindfulness of breathing, **Release through Breathing**. This provides a good setting within which to contemplate the aggregates.

## Theory: A Graduated Release

*Suppose an ocean-going boat rigged with ropes, having been exposed to the water for six months, has been dragged to the shore for the winter. Then the ropes, affected by wind and sun, when soaked by monsoon rains will easily go to waste and rot away. So it is with a monk who applies himself to developing his mind through meditation: his fetters will easily be loosened and rot away. [A.7.67]*

The idea might arise that release is a sudden process; one might have sudden dramatic shifts of perspective, or a realization that allows a whole lot of ill-will to drop away. Such breakthroughs are valid and attachment to various topics and stories can drop away at any time over years of practice. However, another way of looking at release is to do not so much with mental content as with the underlying substructure of experience. What I'm referring to is this: Experiences may pass and new experiences take their place, but this process occurs within the same basic set-up — that of owning experience. Contact says: 'Everything happens to me.' So say we've let go of hankering after some gadget, and now feel more contented; that contentment is the experience that a sense of self forms around. (And indeed a great improvement on the previous model.) Still from that position, one can form views about all these geeks who are addicted to gadgets and how one has gone beyond that — one might even feel like giving them some advice...And so what gets sustained and not challenged by shifts in terms of topics is the sense, 'I am, or I have, this.' As long as the self-designation within contact, intention and attention aren't overhauled, the structure, self-view, remains the same. And that means there is a basis for gain and loss, better and worse, yours and mine — and the basis for suffering and stress remains intact.

The release which is a graduated Awakening has to be a release from any self-view, simply because a) any sense of self will always find conflict with what is taken as other, hence it is a basis for suffering and stress; b) any sense of self has to own or control or maintain that ownership, when in fact it can't; and c) any sense of self is a mirage, compounded out of clinging to the body-mind system called the five aggregates. As this sense isn't ultimately true, it's marked with ignorance. Therefore the way that experience is structured as 'me,' 'mine,' or 'I am other than that' has to change. This release has to do with a shift of energy, a release of that tension and grip; so calming, softening the energy is essential. Even more fundamentally, release has to do with challenging and shifting the view of self, which is the cause of the clinging in the first place. Thus, it's a matter for insight.

Insight doesn't operate outside of calm; the requirement for insight is that the mind is calm and steady enough not to be in the grip of the hindrances. Then, when the mind is clear and confident, insight into the structure of experience can continue; the aggregates can be teased apart by the factor of investigation. Now if we focus on the aggregates in the experience of sense-desire, this comes around through sticking the object (say a chocolate cake) to a perception (lovely, yummy, edible thing) to a mental feeling (pleasant) to an activity (I need that, I can get that) and a further perception (an impression of how good I'll feel when I get that). But if we look at the object in itself, it's just a brown lump, and we know that one way or another we will part company. It cannot be had. Also, we know that it is 'empty'; that is, it's not the perception (wonderful, golden brown, studded with flakes of pure Belgian chocolate), it does not have a lasting feeling. Further, we see that such pleasant feelings as may arise when I eat it (not a sure thing, been fooled by this kind of thing before) will be of momentary duration only. Looked into then, this experience can help you let go of the cake; and, if you look into it insightfully, can weaken the grip of sense-desire and indeed of the aggregating (sticking together) of these aggregates.

Insight is the view that's established by the question 'What does this depend upon?' So when applied to the above example, it would provide

the realization: ‘It depends on the coming together of the five aggregates.’ Further: ‘What does release depend upon?’ Answer: ‘Upon witnessing the five aggregates as compounded, unreliable, subject to change, not mine or contributing to me, a source of pressure on the mind, not to be clung to.’

I use the word ‘witnessing’ here as a translation of ‘*anupassi*,’ which means ‘seeing in the presence of’; in other words, like a witness, you’re relying on direct knowing, not theory. This is a crucial feature of insight: it has to be applied to the experience that’s happening. After all, that things are subject to change is hardly a revolutionary theory: poets write about it frequently. However, to witness your very moods and impulses as changeable, hence unreliable and not part of some constant self, is transformative. It could even be scary if it weren’t for the presence of the factors of Awakening as a support. Hence the need for mindfulness, investigation, calm and the rest.

The usual shorthand formula to explain insight involves three characteristics, witnessing all things as being: impermanent/ changeable (*anicca*); unsatisfactory/stress-producing (*dukkha*); and not-self (*anattā*). These characteristics are to be checked against any experience — are they true or not? To thoroughly check this out takes time, and a maturation of the factors of Awakening. Some habits, phobias and addictions seem to be pretty solid and mine until there’s enough mindfulness and concentration to see through their compounding.

The result of insight, the description of how consciousness releases its activities, is sometimes gradated as a formulaic sequence. An instance of this is: ‘the factors of Awakening are to be developed dependent on non-involvement (*viveka*), dependent on dispassion (*virāga*), dependent on ceasing (*nirodha*) and maturing in release (*vossagga*).’ [M.2] [If you like reading suttas, you’ll find this sequence is repeated throughout the *Bojjhanga Samyutta*, and also with reference to the *brahmavihāra* at S.46.54. As we’ll see, it is echoed as ‘relinquishment’ in the final set of instructions on mindfulness of breathing.]

This sequence presents release as a progressive and ripening process which has its own causes, causes that refer to how the mind holds any experience. So with the experience of sense-objects being changeable, unsatisfactory and unable to be made mine, there is a ripening of non-involvement. You see the drawbacks of holding onto sense-objects: they possess you rather than vice versa; they cost you and they let you down. When you really know this, with direct knowing, it gets so that you can use sense-objects, but you don't buy into them, compete over them, or get tight and defensive around them. In terms of the aggregates, it's a release from being bound to form. So this is a relief for the mind, and it alters how our mind is structured — that is, we'll probably focus on and value qualities like honesty, generosity, calm and compassion more than fashion and movies. You can even develop non-involvement towards subtle form, such as the 'form' of the 'inner body' or manifestations of light that may occur in the mind in meditation.

Dispassion is the sense of not being stirred up by perceptions and feeling; it's a release in terms of those aggregates. Again, it comes when we directly know the agitation and pressure that perceptions, felt meanings and feeling place on the mind. We have to know this through cultivation, not just accept it as a theory: otherwise, as with non-involvement, we dismiss perception (or form) rather than know it. We need to know directly the delight it can give, the shortcomings of that, and that our awareness can stand free and unattached.

In terms of mood, dispassion is close to equanimity, which brings it about. Equanimity is a feeling and a subtle intention or way of holding what arises, whilst dispassion is the resultant mode of consciousness. Dispassion is a way of seeing. So, with equanimity we might meet praise and blame in a spacious and unflustered way; but dispassion comes with the realization that whatever is praised (etc.) is changeable, unsatisfactory and not-self. When the mind is dispassionate it also sees that both the one who does the praising and the very act of praising itself are, in one's direct experience, a set of changeable activities and perceptions and not self. So

praise and blame, and other activities and perceptions are known as 'empty' through this development of insight. Dispassion then renders awareness very steady and clear, with its focus on the ephemeral nature of the conscious process.

Ceasing refers to the stopping of activities. Depending on what you're working on, it could refer to the stopping of craving for a particular item, having reviewed it in terms of the three characteristics. At a more fundamental level, it refers to the arrest of influxes – such as the need to be something, or to be apart from something. It's great when one's mind can finally let go of the resistance to one's role, or can let go of trying to be the mother, teacher, son who always gets it right. As long as one is under the influence of the influxes of sensuality and becoming, the mind is going to feel haunted, unfulfilled and needing more. Ceasing is then the ceasing of activities that follow those influxes; it's the ceasing of suffering and stress. It's a radical and liberating rewiring: when the mind stops solidifying the future, the past, self or other, the view is very open. The wheels of preoccupation stop whirring and the mind is rested in awareness.

Release refers to consciousness. It is the abandonment of 'places' in our spiritual domain where the mind hangs out with the sense of 'this is what I am,' or 'here is where I am.' Consciousness can be stationed at any one of many levels, from sleep to normal waking, to meditative. And within the meditative domain there are several levels of absorption to be stationed at. The world of the sleep state is a very different place from the world of the normal waking state (which is different from an intoxicated state); and the worlds of the various levels of absorption. However in any of these stations, the sense of 'I am' still lingers. But through the dispassionate and direct knowing of any of these stations (well, you've got to be sober and have the factors of Awakening running), there can be a ceasing of the fascination, the seeking and the entrenchment in them.

In the contemplation of the aggregates, I mentioned above some methods of reviewing consciousness; the practice of ‘turning consciousness around’ is aimed at penetrating the sense of there being someone doing the seeing. However, that’s just a technique. What is more long term is to keep going through the process of non-involvement and the rest, so that the realization is founded on a thorough, well-tuned and dispassionate awareness.

Each of these levels of letting go arises dependent on the factors of Awakening. So letting go isn’t exactly something you *do*, it’s something that occurs when there is enough clarity, firmness and the rest to see the stress and danger in holding on, and to know the peaceful strength of awareness when it is enriched. However the highest release is release even from these factors — through knowing that they too are compounded and subject to change, that there is a release from establishing consciousness at any station, in any world. In Buddhist parlance, we say that the mind has *nibbāna*’d. In terms of consciousness, it doesn’t infer or create someone ‘in here.’ So there is no ‘in here’ and hence no ‘out there.’ It’s all here. With the stilling of activities, there is no object, no world. Time, place and self are constructs of consciousness; with *Nibbāna*, these are not constructed. In the words of one of the enlightened nuns in the time of the Buddha, as she turned down the wick of her lamp: *‘like a flame’s going out is the release of my awareness.’* [Therigatha: 5.10]

From the viewpoint of our everyday world this may sound spooky, and maybe unattractive. But as you go through the stages that lead there, you get to know the flavour of release. And you know why the Buddha called complete release ‘the highest happiness.’

## Release through Breathing

This exercise covers the ground outlined by the Buddha in the third and fourth tetrads of his instructions on mindfulness of breathing. The third tetrad concerns entering the quality of mental awareness when the mind is calm and freeing it from any residual defilements. The instructions are: to discern the awareness of the mind (as distinct from the activities of the mind); to gladden that awareness; to steady it; and to free it. This then is a calming (*samatha*) process of purifying the energy of the mind.

Subsequently, the instructions focus on how insight is to be cultivated with regard to body, mental activities, perceptions and feelings, and mental awareness. So this is a purification of view; in other words, a clearing of the fundamental assumptions and attitudes of grasping that lie as latent tendencies in the mind.

Insight refers to a way of penetrating experience to look into what it's made of, what supports it, and how there is release from that. In this process, investigation teases apart what seem to be solid physical entities or mental states into compounded and changeable factors. This experience of the relative and changeable nature of an experience hinges around non-involvement, and vice versa. That is, you have to step back and get things in perspective to notice how it's all variable, how it all depends. Then, when you notice how changeable things are your mind doesn't get so emotionally involved.

Once dwelt upon, this characteristic of changeability is the key to release: what is changeable can't be held as something solid. Now when that



characteristic is seen clearly within all the functions and systems that one calls oneself, the compounding that binds experience into ‘me’ and ‘that’ is no longer sustained. The full maturation of this letting go is relinquishment, whereby the influxes that bind experience into real three-dimensional things happening to a solid self are relinquished. This is synonymous with release.

The teachings of the fourth tetrad are outlined as a way to this release:

*One trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in witnessing changeability’; one trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out witnessing changeability.’*

*One trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in witnessing dispassion’; one trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out witnessing dispassion.’*

*One trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in witnessing ceasing’; one trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out witnessing ceasing.’*

*One trains thus: ‘I shall breathe in witnessing relinquishment’; one trains thus: ‘I shall breathe out witnessing relinquishment.’*

[M.118.21]

The characteristic of changeability can be experienced in the moment-at-a-time fluctuations of the bodily energy (referring to the first tetrad) or of mental activities and feelings (tetrad two). With reference to the mind-base or awareness, qualities such as spaciousness and brightness can also be witnessed as subject to change. What this witnessing brings about is a lessening of intensity, a weakening of the highlight that the mind places on its objects. It’s like someone turns the contrast down. This sense is called ‘dispassion’ or ‘fading’: what we’re aware of is not experienced as a solid thing, but more like the reflection in a pond, shimmering. With a deepening of this dispassion, the triggers and supports of the influxes relax or cease. [For a refresher on influxes, look into **Meditation and the Path to Awakening** in Part One.] So there is less of an interest in firming things up as desirable or undesirable, and this is a significant change in how consciousness operates. With the weakening of the influxes of *kāma* and *bhava*, the mind isn’t firming up an object, but resting in its gentle stillness.

Finally, the sense of awareness as a solid witness also subsides with the thorough relinquishment (*patinissagga*) of the subject/object differentiation. This differentiation may be sensed as a subtle holding in awareness, a holding steady, a trying to see or a trying to release. This creates a witness. So by sensing this tension in the field of awareness (rather than any object of attention) and releasing it, this can drop away. This might be described as ‘objectless awareness’ or ‘Unconditioned.’ However, perhaps it’s best left undescribed, and rather to be experienced for oneself. What can be said is that at this point there’s no room for suffering and stress.



Get settled in with mindfulness of breathing, grounding awareness in the body, tracing the in-out rhythm and strengthening attention around one point. Then when the mind is settled into breathing and its energies are in harmony with the breath-energy, gradually widen the focus to include the sensations of breath-energy passing through the whole body (or as much of the body as you can experience). Notice that your perception of body changes from the ‘flesh, bones and hair’ model that we carry in our minds to something subtler and more vibrant. Recognizing this, consider the perception of the body to be what it is – an impression based on a particular mode of observation and level of consciousness. Notice how this impression pulses and changes. Dwelt upon, this realization gives rise to dispassion – a spacious non-involvement with the transient appearances of the body.

As the body energy steadies and becomes smoother, be aware of the pleasant feel of that. Attune to that and rest in it, so the quality of uplift and brightness and the breathing merge. After a while, rest back from that, contemplating the uplifted state as waves that arise and subside. Calm the state by giving attention to the subsiding aspect of the waves, or by stepping back from the feeling and giving more attention to the physical aspect and location of the breathing. Take note of the very sense of being moved – in this instance in a positive way – and investigate the

difference between the feeling, and the mind's engagement and holding of that feeling. Relax the hold on the feeling to support deeper calm. Consider that whatever is moved is subject to more movement, to change. Dwelling on this leads to dispassion. Because as you focus on its restless changeability, the excitable nature of feeling is experienced as an encumbrance; the mind tends to relax and not keep working the potential for feeling.

When there is the spaciousness of dispassion, focus on the quality of awareness itself. This is the basis of mind from which activities arise. It's always there, but is normally obscured by activities and perceptions. However, if you pose the questions to any mind-state or activity 'where is this happening, where is this located?' you will touch into this mind-base, at least momentarily. So when the mental activities are calm, tune into the basis, the 'who' that is experiencing things. It's an open and receptive field that is arrived at through a deep resting back. Then shift the perspective of the meditation; bring that mental awareness to the fore so that instead of breathing or watching the breathing, the breathing is permeating the awareness. Let the awareness and the breathing mix, so that subtle happiness bathes the mind. Rest in that, letting go of knowing or guiding the process. From time to time, trembles to make something happen may occur, or flurries of anxiety. You will notice all these have a contracting or narrowing effect on the awareness. As you notice that, widen and soften, and release the awareness from activities and any definitions.

This is the mind-base. It has a natural radiance, but also a tendency to adopt activities, and a tendency to form an image of itself. Recognize this mind. Radiance, inner silence and peace are subtle members of a myriad of states that the mind inclines to adopting. The mind's habit of adopting states is its basic ignorance: to be seeking a form, subtle form or formlessness. Let this consideration, a wisdom-sense that you've cultivated with regard to less subtle states, sink in. Let this steady insight work on the tendency for the mind to generate form and time. This will in due course bring around moments of relinquishment, and a long-term trust in Dhamma.

## Difficulties

As with any system, if the mind is struggling, it may benefit from withdrawing from this exercise for a while and focusing on a skilful recollection, *brahmavihāra* or body sweeping. This is also why it's good to have a teacher who can offer advice on your ongoing practice.

There may be difficulties in discerning awareness. By this time you may have a feel for mental activities, perceptions, feelings and you can sense an aware presence which regards these with direct knowing. However, what you'll notice is that when you try to say what awareness is, or focus on it, what you arrive at is a perception: a sense of calm, or space, or clarity. These are subtle mental forms that can be usefully applied to brighten and ease the mind. The drawback is that they can get very interesting. For release however, you don't want to get stuck on those.

So a method or an inclination to sense awareness itself is to change the energy with which one attends – make it less object-oriented and more a matter of feeling cool and equanimous. Not making anything of it, but not going elsewhere either. This deepens and rests your knowing back in awareness itself.

This also brings dispassion, because you're not focused on object-definition or subtle states, but on how you are witnessing. You keep recognizing the changeable and insubstantial nature of any state – so there's nothing to get hold of, no 'this is IT!' Then you get a feel for the coolness of resting in awareness. This is what will bring around a stopping of extremely significant activities that we were hardly conscious of – the activities of the influxes. Of these, the primary ones that elude us in meditation are the influxes of becoming and of ignorance.

Becoming gives us the sense of time and state; it creates the sense of being something now that will be something in the future and was something in the past. Supported by ignorance, it suggests that we have a state, or are a state, or can be separate from the current state. Seeing things more

clearly, what we notice is that states come and go. They move through the becoming process. And yet right now, that can be directly known. So there is a non-manifest, 'unbecome' that 'knows' whatever is manifesting is changeable, insubstantial and not-self. For a deepening into the unbecome, and a relinquishment of the influxes, the experience of change has to be thoroughly experienced and rested into.

A likely snag is that one's mind moves towards getting rid of – which is an aspect of becoming – the move to become nothing, or to not be aware. So there may be an ongoing seesaw between slipping into a formless state with a slightly aversive attitude, and coming back into trying to find where one is. ('Has it all stopped yet?') This is why it's important to develop the enjoyment faculty of the mind, as mentioned in the factors of rapture and ease. It's not just the feeling, but the effect of getting the mind to rest back into experience rather than to be controlling it. The mind has to be willing and open; then it will relinquish what isn't necessary. This is how calm supports insight – it softens the mind up enough to allow it to let go.



### **If this form doesn't help you...**

Release is a process that we can encourage but not force or dictate. Many people find it best to stay with meditation practices that they know and can work with for calming the mind or brightening the heart and let that have its effects. Over time there is a natural cooling and a serenity towards the mind's changes that allows reactive impulses and influxes to fade. Impulses, obsessions, strong views, attachments and senses of identity are activities; we must be wary of generating more activities to dispel them. It is counter-productive to be thrashing or blocking the mind. Moreover, there is a natural inclination towards release from suffering. Hence, it's good to be patient, keep faith with that and whenever you see clinging, first don't get involved with its object, then develop equanimity to its presence. This will lead to dispassion.

## Further

Get used to referring to awareness itself rather than the behaviour of the mind. It's in this domain that the 'view' of belonging occurs as a subtle behaviour, an inclination that you can be aware of. The way we'd verbalize this view might be, 'It needs to be done,' or, 'They want me to...' Although there may be evidence to support those statements, the inclination occurs before them; it's the influx of becoming. You'll find it very helpful to catch that reflex, pause and, bearing it in mind, soften and widen your focus into the field of awareness.

In this way, check all the assumptions, about time, duty, self and other. Who is telling you that? Even the assumption that you shouldn't have assumptions, or should be progressing, or shouldn't feel angry...catch that, widen, soften and let it melt into the field of awareness.

Notice that any detail — any thought, mood or sensation — occurs as a ripple that attracts desire, aversion, worry or comment. In themselves, however, these details don't have to do that. If they are held, seen or sensed within the field, they arise and cease; all the disturbances and complexities of the mind are innately 'empty.' That is, they only have power and solidity if we lose touch with the field of awareness and allow the field to get flooded with influxes.

As a support, from time to time you'll need to come back to the breathing to keep things steady.

Practise sensing and dwelling in that field-awareness. Notice that it is empty of any defining characteristic. In this empty field, there is no future, no past, no cause and effect, nothing to be achieved, nothing to be sustained and nothing to be brought to an end.

Contemplate any *dhamma* - such as the notion of 'future' - within this field, in order to see it as empty of greed, aversion and delusion. For

instance, the only characteristic of future is that it is the future, the 'not-here-yet.' It's neither wonderful nor dreadful; it's void of anxiety or expectation; and as a *dhamma* arising in the present, it's also empty of 'future.' In a like way, 'I am' is just a notion and empty of any essence; thought is just 'thought'; it is neither defiled nor pure, but empty of any essential, lasting reality.

When this process is developed to include any feeling, perception or state of consciousness, it's called the 'descent into emptiness.' In neither coming from, nor going to, nor staying on some base, the mind is empty of suffering and stress.

## Theory: Selfless Persons

*Friends, I do not speak of form as 'I am,' nor do I speak of 'I am' as apart from form. I do not speak of feeling...perception...formations ...consciousness as 'I am,' nor do I speak of 'I am' apart from them...even though a noble disciple has abandoned the five lower fetters, still, in relation to the five aggregates subject to clinging, there lingers in him a residual conceit 'I am,' a desire 'I am,' and an underlying tendency 'I am' that has not yet been uprooted.' [S.22.89]*

The above quote highlights the enigma and potential confusion over realizing Nibbāna and complete Awakening. The point is that they aren't the same thing. One might very well have had such a realization that whole areas of one's self substructure have been released – and yet some remain. In the above incident, Khemaka, the speaker, was astute enough to know that, and honest enough to declare it. This isn't always the case.

I offer an analogy. Say someone is locked up in a prison cell: no windows, no fresh air. And they get the idea that there must be something on the other side of the wall, and then through a process of careful digging and probing, they do break a small hole through the wall, big enough to see the outside world. Imagine their delight: fresh air streaming in and daylight – and a view of a mysterious world far more vivid than that of the dungeon. He or she might well imagine: 'I've made it, I'm free; with this wonderful opening bringing in fresh air and clear light, my suffering is at an end.'



Well this is great, and their intuition, faith, effort and patience are to be commended. But of course, they're not free. Nor is the person in a second example: the one who goes even further and makes a hole big enough to get their head through – although moving even part of one's body out into the wide open space could indeed be exhilarating. The third prisoner gets their whole body out of the jail, but keeps going back inside to rest, eat and do business. It's only the last type, who perseveres and develops the confidence to get out, walk away and live outside the prison, that is truly free.

It's the same with realizing Nibbāna. The same sense of freedom deepens, in four stages, through successively more fundamental grounds where some sense of self (the prison) pertains. These grounds are: the ground of personality, which is governed by 'how to do it' systems and views; the ground of being affected, which is governed by obvious or subtle pleasure and pain; and the ground of being aware, which is governed by subject/object differentiation. (As in 'I am aware of a state of absorption.') A realization of Nibbāna will penetrate all of these, but as the individual reorients, how that is integrated differs: she/he may well assume that they have 'had an Enlightenment experience' and that now 'I am Enlightened.'

The Buddha gently but clearly illustrates the state of the half-in, half-out, semi-realized practitioner thus:

*"This good samana or brahmin, with the relinquishing of views about the past and the future...they regard themselves thus: "I am at peace, I have attained Nibbāna, I am without clinging." Certainly this venerable one asserts the way directed to Nibbāna. Yet this good samana or brahmin still clings, clinging either to a view about the past or to a view about the future or to a fetter of sensual pleasure or to the rapture of seclusion or to unworldly pleasure or to neutral feeling. And when this venerable one regards themselves thus: "I am at peace, I have attained Nibbāna, I am without clinging," that too is declared to be clinging on the part of this good samana or brahmin. All that is conditioned and thus gross, but there is the cessation of formations. Having understood "There is this," seeing*

*the escape from that, the Tathāgata [i.e., the Buddha] has gone beyond that.*  
[M102.24]

What the Buddha is pointing out is that some of those grounds of self remain intact and adhered to. However, the realizations do have validity. So to clarify the path to complete liberation, the Buddha detailed the map of Awakening to show how these grounds are supported by ten ‘fettters,’ and that clusters of these fettters are broken, or substantially weakened, in four stages.

The four stages are called ‘stream-entry,’ ‘once-return,’ ‘non-return’ and ‘arahant.’ The stream-enterer gives up the ground of personality; the once-returned weakens their dependency on the ground I’ve called the ground of being affected, but doesn’t completely transcend it; and the non-returned transcends the ground of being affected, but still has a sense of being a pure awareness. However, the map of the fettters serves as a reminder that even a good taste of freedom isn’t the end of the story; that realizations need to find integration into a whole way of living; and, that it’s as important to focus on the fettters as it is on Nibbāna.

What we’re concerned with in this presentation is breaking the first cluster, which is of three fettters: feeling identified with one’s personality, uncertainty with regard to Dhamma, and holding on to systems and customs (including religious beliefs and meditation techniques). Release, like ceasing, isn’t the destruction of any valid psychological structure, but the non-grasping of it. So, concerning the first fettter: personality is a valid psychological structure. It’s the system that develops as an interface between the ‘interior’ of mind and the ‘exterior’ of the world; and that’s a structure that we need in order to operate with careful speech and actions. We need to be coherent and able to handle the conventional world; we need a relative self. So rather than trying to get rid of our personality (which would be the influx of *vibhava*), in Dhamma-practice we’re handling it with clarity and a here-and-now purpose. It doesn’t have to be the best and we don’t have to store it up as an image. In this way, life gets a lot less complicated.

In the case of personality, exercises in self-acceptance are therefore very relevant. Insight builds on that by reviewing the constituents and wrappings of personality; whether we're feeling pleased with ourselves, sunk in some personal bias or feeling inadequate, the activity is underpinned by taking it seriously as 'This is what I am, what I need to be, or what others think I am.' Yet an image and a set of activities that we witness can't be self – because what is it that witnesses it?

Now that question's just an intellectual approach – but it encourages us to look into the compulsion to keep identifying with a structure that is always going to be (you guessed it!)... changeable, unsatisfactory and not-self. Because there can be a huge amount of wrapping around this structure in terms of needing to be seen as good, and in terms of relational dependencies and security issues. Clinging to personality takes some shifting. However, that's what the development of the factors of Awakening, insight (and good friends) are for. You don't attack the personality, but challenge what causes clinging to it. Basically you keep reviewing what personality holds on to (praise and blame, future and past, success and failure) and also the action of holding (defence, affirmation, security). These are not small matters, so it takes development of inner strength, ease and confidence to bring around a release from that.

Meanwhile, a lack of confidence in the Dhamma remains as a fetter. This means that we speculate over the meaning of the words, or over whether the Buddha's teachings really work, or over aspects of the teaching (how much calm do you need before practising insight?), and so on. Because of this wavering, the mind is hesitant and the factors of Awakening don't blossom. The root of this uncertainty is the assumption that we can understand Dhamma intellectually, or that the formulation of the words is, rather than points to, the truth. This will always throw one's energy around in doubt. For realization, we have to go beyond the mind's conceptual hold on experience. It's like going to a restaurant, seeing 'pizza' on the menu, and then trying to eat that word. Well, we could debate over what kind of pizza is the best – but never have tasted one. Uncertainty concerning Dhamma is bound up with a hesitancy to go into

one's own experience – which is never as clear and straightforward as all those ideas of the Dhamma are.

Naturally, there's also an attachment to the systems and teachings that we've found helpful. Whether it's cooking dinner, playing tennis, matters of cultural etiquette or meditation, systems and customs are also valid. But it's the clinging that 'this is the only way' and 'I'm great because I'm good at this system, and nothing else counts' – that's the dependency. Many of the issues that bind us to personality are found throughout this cluster: in fact, it's said that all these three fetters break at the same time. So they're three aspects of the same thing, which you can summarize as attachment to the structures of the cognitive (thinking and conceiving) mind. That's the system that 'tells us who we are' through measuring our performance against social approval, external systems and our intellectual grasp of the teachings. But being held in the grip of the cognitive mind leads to dogmatism, conformity and ritualism. The Buddha used two similes as a warning against this: that the Dhamma is like a snake, and that it's like a raft. It's like a snake because it has to be grasped properly, just behind the head; grab it by the tail and it will whip round and bite you. It's like a raft because you use it to carry you across a flood – when you get to the other side, you don't pick it up and carry it around on your head [M.22].

This is pretty clear. But to really relinquish these requires penetrating the mind's love of systems and abstractions. Attachment to the cognitive functions gives rise to a clever self who knows what to do – but then gets dogmatic and needs to control life and others to get them to fit their system and views. Release from this attachment means feeling the attraction of knowing who you are and of having things all sorted out in abstract; but more important, it means knowing how this causes stress. This kind of strength and independence can only happen when awareness is endowed with the factors of Awakening.

The next four fetters enumerate attachment on the hedonic/pleasure-pain level, both in terms of sensory activity and meditative absorptions.

These are: sense-desire, ill-will, fascination with absorption and fascination with absorptions into formless states. The once-returner weakens these, and the non-returner gets free of dependence on obvious or subtle levels of pleasure. The final three fetters (conceiving oneself in any respect, subtle agitation and ignorance) point to the attachment to awareness, to the sense of clarity that direct knowing offers. This is what an arahant has seen through. However, such developments are beyond the range of this book. And the Buddha commented that if you drop the first three fetters, you've done most of the work. Because with those you know for yourself what release really is. You just have to keep alert to any sense of 'I am' that forms.

To end on a positive note: in the course of elucidating his predicament, Khemaka realized arahantship, along with all those who were listening to him.

I've dealt with these profound matters rather lightly because I have a sense that too much theory supports attachment to the cognitive sense, of getting interested in the map rather than trekking across the ground. So enough of the theory. Let's now look into some ongoing practices that keep us awake in daily life.

## **Process: Turning the Tides, Crossing the Flood**

*‘When I came to a standstill, friend, then I sank; but when I struggled, then I got swept away...by not halting and by not straining I crossed the flood.’*  
[S.1.1]

Much of what I’ve outlined so far has been concerned with practising meditative skills in the specialized environment of being on one’s own, outside of a functioning situation where responses, interactions and unpredictable events are happening. This is the focus of this book; its aim is to provide you with definable exercises that you can do time and time again in the course of years.

However our mind is mostly operating in real time, and in interactive and random circumstances. Moreover, meditation masters agree that formal practice does need to stand upon firm foundations in daily life such as ethics, sense-restraint and kindness. These have to be checked and kept in good order to support formal practice. Without these, formal meditation exercises aren’t going to go very far towards release from the influxes. So a lot of practice is about maintaining these standards through the tumble of the day.

Similarly, the clarity and realizations that accrue in formal practice have to be integrated into daily life, as the influxes come on in full force in one’s habitual mode of operations. Without integration it’s like learning to cook good food in a class, and then not cooking any when you go home. It’s at home in your daily life that you need to stop eating junk. It’s also where

the influxes have the extra advantage: the world in general follows their messages unquestioningly, and much of one's personal habits are conditioned by the world. Also, some of the really stuck activities only come to light when you're interacting with others, or needing to get a job done on time. Right then and there is where you need to use all your skills to work on release. So for a full coverage of what needs to be released, you want to establish forms, structures and practices in daily life.

## **Perfections**

The daily-life forms and practices that are traditionally used in Buddhist cultures are called '*pārami*' – a word that carries meanings of 'full and complete' and 'something that causes transcendence.' They're generally referred to as 'perfections.' These are ten aspirations or commitments to guide one's daily life so that we meet and move out of habitual programs and generate good kamma. So they do the job of continually fencing off the push of habit, and with that the push of the influxes. These perfections lead the mind from one's daily-life patterns to the factors of Awakening, such as investigation and mindfulness.

How they support insight is that through sustaining a quality like patience when you're about to blow your top, you can witness that impatience unfold. Then in accordance with your development of investigation, you get to see the perceptions and the activities that are flooding your mind. And this opens that habit up for penetrative insight. As you cool down, you then review that perception and activity: 'How real is the goal or destination that I'm rushing to get to?' (Right now, it's just an impression in the mind.) 'Does holding this do me any good?' 'Does it help anyone else?' 'Does it support the realization of Nibbāna?' This is how you build release into your daily life.

The ten perfections are: generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom/discernment, persistence, patience, truthfulness, resolve, kindness and equanimity. Obviously you need resolve and patience with all of them, otherwise they don't get established and don't stick. You need discernment to look at what's happening and get the point. And, all of the

perfections lead to the development of the deep wisdom of release. But you can take a few and use them to work on particular weak spots.

In putting them to work, there are three stages. The first is one of establishing the perfection, say, of developing generosity to cause the mind to empathize more fully with others. So that takes a resolution: no one imagines they're stingy, but maybe we don't look out for opportunities to give – material things (even if that's just feeding birds), or service, or giving time to people who could use some attention (say the disabled or elderly people). But when you establish a perfection, you actively seek a chance to get it going.

The way to make a resolution firm (notice that many New Year's resolutions crumble in a couple of weeks) is to slow the mind down so that it's receptive and then place the resolution in it. Make it quite specific – not just 'I'll try to be a more giving, less demanding person,' but, 'I'm going to ask Ahmed what his opinions are every time I make a proposal about the project that we're engaged in.' Or, 'I'm going to call Suzanna on the first Sunday of every month to check if she needs support with her ailing mother.'

Don't do too many! Just take the phrase, intone it in the mind, and listen to it and the silence after it. You might even strengthen it with a body-movement (stand up, for instance, or fold your arms). Listen in to the silence – is the mind steady, or do you detect a faltering of, 'Yeah, well, I'll try'? Not good enough. It's time to make a resolution. It may turn out that you fail at times, but right now you want to feel that resolve strengthen in your mind. Let it give a shape to your mind. If you go through this process of resolve five to ten times, a pattern of mental energy, a subtle form, will get established. Things being changeable, you'll probably need to come back to that resolution every week or so, to firm it up. At first, it's like a sandcastle on the beach of the world – but you can make it into solid ground.



It's also the case that the relevance of some specific resolutions wears out – the project's finished, Suzanna's mother has passed on – but when you get the results of one set, you feel encouraged to develop another. 'Talk to the family before reading the newspaper.' 'Get up on Sunday morning at 7:30 and do some meditation for half an hour.' Whatever makes sense. You're shaping your life rather than getting moulded by circumstance.

You can develop morality in terms of right speech, that is, not gossiping or saying things behind people's backs that you wouldn't say to their face. You can establish renunciation by differentiating between wants and needs, by going into a store and getting what you need, rather than what is being presented as what you need. To live a simple, balanced life in a multi-option consumer society requires some renunciation; and renunciation takes wisdom – the ability to differentiate and discern. Persistence is necessary in any resolution; it means having discerned what is useful and helpful from what isn't, to then apply yourself in those terms. It means maintaining the focus. It also means sustaining it: not through blind will power but through appreciating the good, recollecting the good that you've done on a daily basis. Spending time in appreciation and gratitude is an essential application of the perfection of persistence – it's a doing that gives the heart the food to keep going.

All of these perfections have mundane as well as meditative benefits. And like these, the other perfections are easy enough to grasp, and even inspiring, as ideas.

However stage two is 'working' the perfection, which is less inspiring because one has to meet the resistance to it. This resistance may start as the voice of reason, 'I don't have to do that today...I don't have the time...it's awkward.' If one persists in the resolve, then there's generally some emotional discomfort – feeling pressurized, feeling selfconscious, or feeling that there's no point: 'I don't really have to be kind to this arrogant and bossy manager.' But who says that people have to deserve kindness? It's your own mind you're trying to develop, not someone else's. And in this instance, kindness might mean not letting aversion take over.

What you can know is that there is resistance to applying the perfection, because it disturbs or confronts one's personal perspectives. *But that's exactly what you want it to do!* This is about getting out of the grip of that substructure.

Patience is of course a very demanding practice in a busy life; but more than that it's one of the supreme agents for turning the tide of the activities. It's not a 'grit your teeth' attitude, but a softening into the present moment, so that you open to and accept the way things are now. You maintain aware presence and put activities of 'getting there' and 'how long?' on hold. It's quite a test. Patience is very important for meditation, for moderating the factor of persistence, for the development of equanimity – and for everyday release.

When you work the perfection, you can expect some inner turbulence. Maybe even some outer turbulence too – other people may do a double-take as you turn down the invitation for a drink. But perfections are for other people too: not to impose your practice on someone else, but maybe to hold up a mirror so that they can, if they choose, look into the cause and effect of their own actions.

In terms of your own mind, remember that what resists the perfections – manipulations, doubt, righteousness or apathy – are the latent tendencies that you want to bring to light. This is in order to know them as not-self and relinquish them. In the Buddhist tradition, it is through practising these that the Buddha gained the depth and strength to relinquish the substructure of self and realize full Awakening.

So this stage, of working, brings the factor of persistence to the fore and also purifies it. Persistence is not a quick fix surge. Bursts of effort are of course useful for pushing aside unskilful topics of thought and behaviour: to refrain from giving attention to addictions that you know do you no good is not a matter for negotiation but decisive action. However, for penetrating to and relinquishing the self-view, a broader view and a steady long-term energy are required. So we persist beyond getting the

idea of a quick fix, or having one-shot solutions. And you develop the wisdom to not persist in something that's not worth a sustained and wholehearted effort, and also to look at problems from a range of angles. It's like untying a knot – you examine, you attempt, you soften and tease out a loose strand and you keep going. In this way, persistence becomes a vital factor in shaping how your mind works. Of course sometimes you fail in your efforts to sustain a perfection, or have lapses, but you look into that, learn and try again.

Stage three is fulfilment. That is, you've turned the tide and come out of the scenario of aversion or greed or panic that your mind was creating. So you've landed in a place of quiet strength and fulfilment. Take truthfulness for example: when the mind is spinning a story about how he is and how you are and how it should be...Just check: 'Is this true?' (Of course at first all stories seem to be.) Then: 'What specific items tell you it's true?' Get as specific as you can. There's some struggle there, because mostly we'll get the loudly voiced message of our opinions, expectations and assumptions. 'It shouldn't be this way' is generally the first of these fantasies that we see through, but with perceptions of other people, you have to persist with the question: 'Uh-huh, but what exactly are the signs that he's a control-freak? That she's lazy?' You might come up with one or two pieces of evidence. Then: 'So, no one else is like that, eh?' 'You wouldn't do anything like that, would you?' But if you tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but...the illusion of 'me and them' starts to fade into: 'There are habits that affect us all.' The result is that you come out of your fixed view and open into the fulfilment of wisdom and compassion. And there's joy in that.

### **Address the specific, drop the proliferations**

Cultivating perfections most immediately enhances the factors of Awakening of mindfulness and investigation. Mindfulness, investigation and energy are obvious requirements in working with perfections; they're the agents that get strengthened. However the results, the fulfilment of any perfection are the other factors – the joy or rapture when you come through a struggle and the resultant tranquillity. There are also long-term

results: as these perfections wear away at the substructure of self, bringing to light and passing through the voices of doubt, self-pity and entitlement (to name a few), the mind more easily moves into concentration. Because it's this substructure, which we hardly noticed at first, that is the seedbed for the turbulences that produced all those flurries of thought and lapses of attention. The result of seeing that, that realized understanding, is equanimity – you know this stuff comes and goes and you know who it creates, but you're just not going to mess with it any more.

With this, the emphasis on our actions is to be mindful of them as they are, and not as some personal property. Mindfulness is the leader of the factors of Awakening; it sets the arena for the process. It's also the factor that you can most readily bring into your daily round. Mindfulness can't always be on breathing or on body sweeping or walking – though it's good to come back to these in the lunch-breaks, the traffic jams and the short walk to school or the shops. However, a key to bringing mindfulness to bear in daily life is what I'd call 'addressing the specific.'

What I mean by this relates to the fact that most of the time, we are dealing with generalizations and abstractions. So we talk about 'going to work' – but what does that mean? What it probably doesn't mean is being aware of closing the front door, opening the car door, getting in the driver's seat, putting the key in the ignition...etc. What it may very well mean is holding an idea of 'what I've got to do' with a certain sense of pressure and uncertainty, stumbling out of the house in that state hardly aware of the weather or what's happening in the street, fumbling for some keys, going back in the house to find them, and all the time being held in the perceptions and activities that arise around the concept 'work.' But where is that 'work?' It's a perception in the mind, and it's activating generalizations or 'proliferations' (*papañca*). In this process, an impression strikes the mind along with a feeling, and a set of programmed activities start running. Now you don't have to not go to work to check that habit, because in real time, going to work involves specific actions that you can be mindful of. So you come back to direct experience and move out of

influx-biased mental programs. If you keep this up, work may even become play!

Dropping the proliferations goes even deeper. Those programs are not just portraying a world of form and function, but also a self of history and character. So some of these mental processes are about acting to win approval, or working under an impression of inadequacy, or relating to the world with a sense of entitlement or obligation. The proliferation experience is also one of projection, in which familiar programs run through relationships, performance and self-images. These programs will keep transforming the specific here and now experience into 'another one of those' – i.e. generalizations. So with people it's 'another one of those guys who don't take responsibility...never express appreciation... always want to take over.' With performance and work it's another sense of pressure to achieve, and feeling that you're being judged. With self-image it's another one of those stories, 'Everyone expects so much of me,' or 'I don't see why I have to bother with all this.' And so on.

With mindfulness, we first come back to the here and now of what is manifesting through the external senses. Take time to notice the feel of the steering wheel, the specific colours or types of cars on the road, and so on. And with people: What is she actually saying and asking for? Remember: *It's unlikely that you will fully get it immediately. But you'll think you did.* Our attention only takes in a small fraction of what is manifesting, which may have all kinds of significant emotional nuances, suggestions... and has the other person's programs running in it. So to really get it, and not get one's own biased take on what she's said, you'll be well advised to check. 'Do you mean...?' or 'That sounds to me like...is that right?' or 'So, what you'd like is...' or 'Uh-huh, can you give me some more detail...?' With mindfulness you just know you're hearing and getting some effects. Then you back that up with full awareness – check it out.

The other focus that we maintain is mindfulness of our own mental states, as they specifically arise. 'This is irritation,' 'this is aspiration,' 'this is uncertainty,' 'this is eagerness.' One idea is to spend two or three minutes

just naming the mind-state that is specifically arising, doing this four or five times during the day. At home you might have a shrine or an image that you use to remind you to stop and check in. (You might set an alarm.) As you get more proficient at checking in, then do so whenever a disturbance hits the mind. Even for one minute. You can then use the skills of **Deep Attention** or **Softening and Widening into Awareness**. In this way you get a specific reference to a generalization habit; then you investigate, ‘What brings this up? What does it depend on? How does it feel in my body? What person does it create?’ And then, ‘How to relate to that?’ Not to make them go away, but just to release that perception or energy from being stuck by your aversion or guilt or intimidation program. You can even do this witnessing and attending out loud with a friend for fifteen minutes – provided that they just listen with empathy.

The theme is, whether it’s good or bad, inane or profound – when it’s held in the specific, it can arise and pass and it doesn’t have to stick. It’s simple, but to really know and practise this is the first level of Awakening.

### **Cultivating a Dhamma-body**

Cultivating these forms and intentions has a transformative effect on the structure of the mind. Just consider that the mind isn’t a thing, but a dynamic system of intelligence that is continually processing information. It’s not your brain, though brain-functions (and heart-functions) play a part in its operations. As our meditation experience shows us, this information is energetic – thoughts, impulses, feelings, reactions and so on are all in flux. Whenever you develop a focus, this energy streams in accordance with the intention of that focus, in line with the attention parameters of that focus. Say you’re focusing on a piece of work, then the function of that work is the attention frame, and the attitudes and ethical energy that you put into that are the intention. Your mind then gets moulded by that activity for as long as it goes on. In brief, it’s kamma again – you become what you put your mind into. And the most important single factor in this is intention. This is what shapes your mind, gives it its firmness, its steering and its engine. Accordingly, if you shape it in terms of perfections, that’s a good shape for Awakening. So as far as your

mind goes, more important than whether you write novels or sweep the streets for a living, is whether you do whatever you do with mindfulness, kindness and honesty.

Now this probably isn't the case as far as self-image goes. But self-image is a pretty crude shape that is based on confused drives and can't manage much flexing. It's too fixated and doesn't fit the way the mind works, so we're usually not at peace with ourselves. And as long as we relate to livelihood, possessions and even relationships with the unconscious drive to form a good self-image, then these aspects of our lives are held in a potentially crippling grip. Even when this wasn't our intention, self-view takes over everything. So the ongoing question in terms of livelihood is – how is this shaping me? Am I dependent on it for a self-image? Since the job or the relationship, or even the territory, will go one day, and you'll be left with the resultant mindset and energetic shape, it's good to get a sense for how these are framing and moulding your mind. The advice is to use the occupation or the life-shape to develop perfections as a base for insight.

It's also the case that as long as you keep balancing your livelihood with meditative practices, your mind's not going to get too rigidly fixated. Meanwhile, one of the interesting features of Dhamma-practice is that it doesn't eradicate personality (though it can annul our attachment to it) and it doesn't render us as impersonal abstractions. In fact, the specific emergence of each person's mind-stream as it is moulded by Dhamma takes on a distinctive shape. (Though you might call it tone or temperament.) Advanced Dhamma-practitioners may be still or exuberant or both by turns, and send forth powerful or subtle energies. As we noted in the previous sections, bodily, conceptual and emotional activities are aspects of a whole 'field' of subtle energy. As we develop *samādhi*, this becomes a unified subtle body that feels firm and bright. What occurs is that skilful activities leave their patterns in the whole field. One of the long-term benefits of this is that you get 're-wired' and you can sense the contractions in that field/body whenever there is suffering, stress or imbalance. By referring to this you can detect the delusions that

your thoughts or emotions are creating. It gets so that even when a view sounds convincing, or an emotional surge feels good, that field of awareness 'knows' it's not true – at this moment at least. Then you act and live in a way that is in conformity with your awareness; you're at peace with yourself, and you know that your mind's 'shape' is just this. This is then a precious development, because this 'Dhamma-body,' this field of awareness, will be a more reliable guide than any theory.



## Sidetracks

To complete this set of instructions, I'll comment on a few sidetracks that may occur in meditation practice. These can keep you preoccupied with certain unusual phenomena that are rather pleasant and seem to be a breakthrough to Awakening, or heralding one. Because of this distorted perception, a sidetrack can establish a false view and become an obstacle.

Here, the guidance of a skilled teacher is recommended.

### **Involuntary body movements (*kriya*)**

It may be that you experience involuntary body movements which are accompanied by an experience of release. These movements may be of shaking or of spasms; they look odd, even alarming, to an outsider, but to the one who's experiencing them, it feels as if some blocked energy is freeing itself.

This phenomenon can go on for months or years, along with the view that some old kamma or energy is working its way out and that in the due course of time it will stop. I've known people be in this for years. It's a fascinating illusion; it may not do much harm, but it does encourage a passive 'let it happen' attitude and weakens mindfulness and the potential for insight.

If this occurs a few times, fine, but if it persists, I'd recommend reviewing the process. There's probably a point where your mind feels the ease of relaxing into an energy and you go with it. In that case, it's best to resist that inclination and establish mindfulness on a tangible meditation theme. Mindfulness established on the central spinal axis of the body will help to ground the energy. From there you may widen your focus to include your entire body, or your breathing, but keep that focus on the spinal axis.

## **Inner lights or sounds (*nimitta*)**

It may be that you experience inner lights or sounds in your meditation practice. They will probably be accompanied by a state of rapture, stillness and conviction. These are called '*nimitta*,' meaning 'defining marks.' That is, they become the defining mark, or benchmark, of a state of concentration. Although some people do experience these as their mind becomes more absorbed, and even use them as meditation objects for deeper absorption, they can be an obstacle to insight. This is because such marks are conducive to a fascinated and passive state of mind. With the accompanying rapture comes the conviction that one has arrived at a supramundane state (hence a little puffed-up by it all), and the examination of this state as changeable, compounded and empty falters. On the other hand, searching for these *nimitta* can become a futile exercise. The advice is: if you 'see' lights or hear subtle whistling, fine; your mind is going inwards. But rather than head for these signs, look instead at the *nimitta* that are pointed out by the arahant Dhammaddhanā: '*the four foundations of mindfulness are the nimitta of samādhi.*' [M.44.12]

## **Intuitions of Oneness or of being Enlightened**

Again, these will almost certainly be accompanied by an experience of rapture or stillness which, because it isn't the normal you, feels like an enlightened state. One feels 'heightened,' perhaps not able to sleep. There may be an accompanying powerful energy, and even an 'out of the body' experience. The short response is that there are no 'enlightened states;' there are absorptions, realizations and releases from aspects of one's normal landscape of self. These are all compounded, dependent on causes and conditions. If such states have an almost magnetic pull, I'd recommend that you ground yourself in simple physical tasks, and in reflective conversation with other people. Eat, work and sleep. When you want to meditate, do so with your eyes open and focus on something that is strong on mindfulness but doesn't lead to rapture: say counting your breaths or investigating thoughts. The worst aspect of the experience is the view 'I am Enlightened,' which can justify eccentric and dramatic behaviour and embarrassingly prophetic utterances. However, with time and care, 'Enlightenment' is curable.



## Closing Remarks

In concluding this series of instructions, I'd like to offer some remarks. First of all, it seems good to remind you that this book isn't intended to be the kind that you read through for ideas and inspiration and then are finished with. If it works for you, it will do so by being something like a cook-book or a maintenance manual: you don't have to read it cover to cover (though that might happen over the course of time), but you might find an exercise or two that suit you at this time; you put the instructions into practice, work on them and let them have their effects over a period of time. The subsections headed 'Difficulties' are offered to support you with the common snags, and the ones headed 'Further' may offer some possibilities that lead you on. Meditation practice develops over time, often in terms of years rather than weeks. The major fault I'd find in these instructions is that they mostly highlight the 'doing' aspect of the practice, and can't adequately illustrate the need to allow developments to happen over the course of time. A lot of it isn't about what you *do*, but about how you are changed over time by the process.

If it were to work out that many people found a lot of these instructions useful, I'd be delighted; but if some people benefit from some of these instructions at least some of the time, putting this manual together still will have been worth my while. I don't think that anything I've written is downright wrong, but if there is anything in these pages that has a negative effect on your practice or causes confusion, please leave it aside.

If your interest in meditation develops, you'll find benefit in attending a meditation retreat for a weekend, a week or longer. There are many

meditation centres throughout the world which offer retreats in supportive environments led by experienced teachers. However, I would stress that daily practice at home is a staple – much better to do half an hour a day every day, than a ten-day retreat once a year. Establishing a meditation period as part of the daily routine has a steady transformative effect on your life; it also means that you have the opportunity to bring mindfulness, goodwill and compassion to bear on external events of the day as well as on the shifts of your internal atmosphere.

As the layout of the manual illustrates, I believe that it's helpful to have some grasp of Dhamma as theory and the overarching vision of the Buddha. What this book rests upon are the collection of teachings and terms in one school of Buddhism – Theravada. There are other schools and forms, and without going into which is the best, I'd just say that it can be confusing to attempt to apply the techniques and terms of one school within the purview of another. So by all means look around, but I can't guarantee that the concerns and values of Tibetan or Zen Buddhism will necessarily be met in this manual.

In terms of Theravada teachings, there are many books on Dhamma, and there are now translations available from the original Pali language into contemporary English by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi and Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu. The quotations I use throughout are either directly from them, or based on their work. As to how much study you need to do, one of my teachers, Ajahn Chah, recommended 80% practice and 20% study. This was the standard he gave to monks, who live in a situation where a lot of teaching, modeling and practice is built in to the way they live. A lay person might find a higher proportion of study beneficial for inspiration, and also in line with the principle that if you're studying Dhamma, then at that time you're not getting absorbed in media and messages that go against clarity, goodwill and letting go.

As we are instructed at our ordinations: 'Make an effort in a cheerful way.'

## Glossary of Selected Terms

Here is a selection of terms used in the book that you might appreciate more detail on.

**absorption** (*jhāna*) Meditative concentration is defined in terms of absorptions. These are states of mind characterized by what is missing (such as hindrances, or thinking) and what is present (such as ease). There are four levels of absorption. The first is supported by the presence of bringing to mind, evaluation, rapture, ease and one-pointedness. At this level, the mind is removed from the hindrances (for as long as the absorption lasts). This may lead to three sequentially deeper absorptions. Second *jhāna* leaves bringing to mind and evaluation behind and is supported by confidence, rapture, and ease. Third *jhāna* cools the mind so that the rapture disappears and is replaced by equanimity and mindfulness. Ease is still apparent. In the fourth *jhāna*, the mind is so still that only equanimity and mindfulness are discernable.

There are also four successively more subtle mental states that can be accessed from fourth *jhāna*: the 'sphere of boundless space,' the sphere of boundless consciousness,' '...of nothingness,' and '...of neither-perception-nor-non-perception.' These are sometimes classified as the fifth to eighth *jhāna*.

It should be noted that absorptions (especially third and fourth) are comparatively rare among all but experienced meditators.

**appreciative joy** (*muditā*) This is the uplift that occurs when the mind takes pleasure in the welfare and happiness of others.

**ardour** (*ātapi*) This is one of the three factors that are essential for establishing mindfulness in a purposeful way, the others being mindfulness and clear comprehension.

**becoming** (*bhava*) Becoming is one of the three influxes – sensuality, becoming and ignorance. In the analysis of the four noble truths, becoming (and its twin, non-becoming, *vibhava*) are also listed along with sense-desire as the source of suffering and stress.

**bringing to mind** (*vitakka*): also rendered as ‘conceiving’ or ‘initial thought’ or ‘initial application.’ This act of ‘naming’ an object is how the thinking mind forms a focus.

**clear comprehension** (*sampajañña*) This is an attention that, like deep attention and direct knowing, supports a wise apprehension of phenomena. It comprehends whether a mind-state is skilful or not, whether a hindrance or a factor of Awakening is present or not, and what causes either of these to arise or decline. Clear comprehension is one of the three factors that are essential for establishing mindfulness in a purposeful way, the others being ardour and mindfulness. It is supported by evaluation so that rather than just holding something in mind, it is alert and enquiring.

**clinging** (*upādāna*): also rendered as ‘grasping,’ ‘feeding on’ or ‘taking as a support.’ Although the word is stark and graphic, it refers to the mind’s dependency on sights, sounds, ideas (as well as on becoming, systems and customs and assumptions of self-hood), even when these are not ethically blameworthy.

**compassion** (*karunā*) The mind’s inclination to ward off pain and suffering in a clear and empathic way.

**conscience and concern** (*hiri-ottappa*) This is the mind's ethical valuing of oneself and others, something that causes a recoiling from abusive or harmful behaviours.

**consciousness** (*viññāna*) The activity that brings an object into awareness through a sense-door. (Mind-consciousness brings thoughts, emotions, intentions and perceptions – collectively called '*dhamma*' – into awareness.) Consciousness is then said to 'cling' to that object and take it as a support. An 'unsupported' or 'unestablished' consciousness (i.e. one that isn't dependent on the senses or on any mind-state) is an attribute of an arahant.

**contact** (*phassa*) The Buddha classified contact to be of two kinds. One is the immediate impression through the senses of something being present. This is called 'resistance contact' – something strikes the eye, ear or jumps into the mind. This gives us the experience of form. Guarding this is the activity of sense-restraint; directing it is the activity of bringing to mind. The other form of contact is called 'designation contact,' which is the impression that the object has on the mind. This is bound up with perceptions and feeling and gets complex, because one set of impressions trigger further impressions – for example, 'cat' may trigger 'cuddly' or 'allergy.'

**deep attention** (*yoniso manasikāra*) This is also translated as 'wise attention,' 'systematic attention' or 'appropriate attention.' It's the attention that focuses on the affective process of an experience – whether it's conducive to skilful or unskilful states for example. It helps to select a suitable object or theme for meditation, and an enquiry into cause and effect and the four noble truths. Along with wise advice from another person, the Buddha considered deep attention to be a fundamental support for Dhamma-practice.

**defilements** (*kilesa*) These are unskilful factors such as greed, hate, delusion, opinionatedness and lack of moral concern. Whereas the term 'hindrance' refers to five sticking points, 'defilement' is often used without any definite list, but to refer to any function of the mind which is led by unskilful factors.



**direct knowing** (*abhiñña*) This is the knowing that is based in awareness rather than in referring an object or experience to a past set of impressions or concepts. In M.1 it is distinguished from conceiving; hence, it is a non-conceptual cognition.

**ease** (*sukha*) Literally the opposite of *dukkha*, this can be translated as ‘pleasure’ or ‘happiness.’ However, in meditation it is a contented rather than excited pleasure – a happiness born of non-involvement.

**equanimity** (*upekkhā*) The ability to be on-looking without adding emotional bias.

**evaluation** (*vicāra*) This is also translated as ‘pondering,’ ‘sustained thought’ and ‘consideration.’ It is the factor that pairs with bringing to mind to give the thinking mind a reading of an object of attention. Whilst *vitakka* names and points the mind to an object, *vicāra* handles, feels and assesses the object in terms of perceptions and feelings. Evaluation supports clear comprehension.

**foundations of mindfulness** (*satipatthāna*) This is an overview of how mindfulness should be brought to bear on four aspects of experience: the experience of body, of feeling, of how the mind is affected and of the mental processes that are significant for Awakening. The latter comprises positive factors (such as the factors of Awakening) and negative ones (such as the hindrances). By bringing mindfulness and clear comprehension to bear on these, one learns how to support and further the positive and eliminate the grounds for the negative. Furthermore, the view of insight that mindfulness and clear comprehension provides reveals that neither the positive nor the negative comprise a self.

**four noble truths** The Buddha’s teachings can be summarized in terms of the four noble truths. The first truth is that ‘There is *dukkha*.’ This truth points to ageing, sickness and death, as well as to birth, in order to highlight the sense of vulnerability that all sentient beings must experience. It also details the state of clinging to or depending on the five

aggregates to be *'dukkha.'* This gives us an idea of the range of meanings that *'dukkha'* can cover – pain, sorrow, vulnerability, uncertainty, stress and unsatisfactoriness.

The second noble truth – that *'dukkha'* has a source or origin' – names the origin of suffering not as the factors of the first truth (which seem to be unavoidable) but as sense-craving, craving to be something and craving to be nothing. The last two (*bhava-tanhā* and *vibhava-tanhā*) are the pressures that cause the mind to build up an identity in terms of time – 'I was, I am, I will be' – or by negating personal habits and history – as in 'it's nothing to do with me, it's just the way things are.' The latter has a negative attitude towards life and also is the grounds for moral nihilism and irresponsibility.

With this truth we are instructed that the root of the problem is one of the craving bound up with the five aggregates, a craving for a solid self.

The third noble truth is that there is a ceasing of *dukkha*. This is through the complete and dispassionate relinquishment of craving. So with this truth, we are given a realistic way of freeing the mind. Although old age, sickness and death cannot be avoided, the fear and distress around identifying with them can be cut off. This cutting off is the experience of Nibbāna, a term which is rendered as 'blown out' or 'unbinding' and refers to the force of craving.

The fourth noble truth is of the Path that encompasses all the skilful means (of which meditation forms an essential part) that contribute to the ending of *dukkha*. It should be borne in mind that a) meditation is only a part of the Path (and needs to be established on the ethical aspects of the Path) and b) that Buddhist meditation is only for the elimination of *dukkha* – not for psychic powers of any kind.

**goodwill** (*mettā*): also rendered as 'kindness' or 'loving-kindness.' This is the mind's inclination to provide support or nourishment for others or oneself in a clear and empathic way.

**ignorance** (*avijjā*): also ‘Unknowing’ or ‘obscuration.’ Generally ignorance is of the four noble truths. It is an energy that pushes attention away from the ‘direct knowing’ of awareness. Ignorance is also the sense of ‘missing the point’ that angles the mind to the aspect of the pleasure (rather than skilfulness) of an object or process, and towards becoming and non-becoming (rather than to changeability). The dispelling of ignorance is the main aim of Dhamma-practice.

**influx** (*āsava*): also ‘canker,’ ‘taint,’ ‘outflow,’ ‘effluent.’ These are the currents that sweep into awareness and send it out to cling to sense-objects, to be or not be something in time (hence becoming) or to handle experience unwisely (hence ignorance). Occasionally, ‘views’ – strong opinions, attitudes and persuasions – are added to the list.

**mind** (*citta*) This term is also rendered as ‘heart,’ or ‘awareness’ – which gives an idea of the breadth of the reference. Mind in Buddhist parlance is the affective-responsive system, an intelligence that receives perceptions from the external senses, and feelings from the body. It formulates mental perceptions and mental feelings (thus we can feel pleased by a sight, not because of the eye, which is neutral, but because of the derived mental perception). Mind also has its own ‘organ,’ *mano*, (translated as ‘mind-organ,’ ‘intellect’ or ‘mind’) which, through attention, formulates concepts out of sense-perceptions. Mind-organ has no feeling and serves to classify, structure or give detailed information to the mind (future, past, self and other are examples of the mind-objects that it creates).

Mind is affected and feels various forms of happiness and grief. Its evolved responses are our mental behaviour, ranging from compassion to aversion, from depression to elation, from patience and mindfulness to deceitfulness and delusion. The domain of these justifies the use of the words ‘heart’ and ‘awareness.’

Of these terms, ‘awareness’ refers to the most fundamental property of mind, which is the ability to receive an impression. It is because of this that we can directly know an impression rather than add responses and

interpretations to it. It is on this property of mind that mindfulness and liberation is based. Liberation can be understood as the freedom from negative, afflictive behaviour. More profoundly it can mean liberation from *dukkha*.

It should be understood that the Buddha did not postulate a liberated mind as having an immaterial, eternal existence, rather that this affective-responsive experience can be laid to rest.

**Nibbāna** (The Sanskrit 'Nirvāna' is more commonly used) This is variously translated as 'blowing out,' 'extinguishing' (as of a fire) or 'Unbinding' (as of clinging). So it is not a state, but a process of removing the basis for greed, hatred and delusion. The two common ways in which the term is used are first as the extinguishing (etc.) of defilements – so that the mind can operate in a pure and unfettered way; and second, the ceasing of the aggregates. The appreciation of the latter rests on the understanding that the aggregates have no lasting or real existence, they are the framework from which the mind weaves an insecure reality. The removal of defilements will bring dispassion and release in terms of how we function. Then, with the ceasing of the substructure of the aggregates, at the end of a life-span, there is no ground for further birth.

**one-pointedness** (*ekaggatā*) This is the factor of absorption that arises dependent on bringing to mind, non-involvement and evaluation. It occurs in meditation when the quality of ease has calmed rapture and the mental energy; the energy of focusing and the bodily energy are in harmony. The resultant merging of mind and body is experienced as a firmness in awareness, which is hence not penetrated by sense-impressions.

**rapture** (*pīti*): also 'uplift,' 'joy.' This is a positive state of a gladdened mind that is accompanied by a similar bodily energy, flush or tingling. It can be based on beauty, or on powerful uplifted emotions. In meditation, rapture is based on the removal of the five hindrances and is said to be born of non-involvement. One of the factors of absorption and of Awakening, it gives confidence and energy to the mind.



## **Further Connections**

For Internet connections to articles, books and places within Theravada Buddhism, I'd recommend:

**[www.accesstoinight.org](http://www.accesstoinight.org)**

**[www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net)**

**[www.forestsangha.org](http://www.forestsangha.org)**

(the umbrella website that includes many of Ajahn Chah's monasteries)

**[www.cittaviveka.org](http://www.cittaviveka.org)**

(the website of the monastery where I live, which also has teachings you can download)

**[www.forestsanghapublications.org](http://www.forestsanghapublications.org)**

(a place where this book as well as many more Sangha publications can be found)



### **Note on the Author**

Born in London in 1949, Ajahn Sucitto entered monastic life in Thailand in 1975. He subsequently took bhikkhu ordination there in 1976, but returned to Britain in 1978 to train under Ven. Ajahn Sumedho in the lineage of the Thai forest master, Ven. Ajahn Chah.

In 1979, Ajahn Sucitto was part of the group that established Cittaviveka, Chithurst Forest Monastery, in West Sussex. He has lived there for the greater part of his monastic life, but travels on teaching engagements throughout the world.



