WORDLESS QUESTIONING

an introduction to Buddhist meditation and reflection

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by Gambhīro Bhikkhu

Published by Publicações Sumedhārāma

ISBN 978-989-8994-35-6

Editor: Kovilo Bhikkhu

Illustrations: Madalena Scafuro

This book is available for free download at

www.forestsangha.org

www.a-buddha-ujja.hu

Produced with the LaTeX typesetting system, set in Crimson Roman and Alegreya Sans.

First edition, 2022

Contents

Introduction

While I was studying at Budapest in 2005, I remember looking for books which could help me get a useful perspective on my confused experiences. There was no lack of explanation and advice, but they were missing a concrete direction: 'Interesting ideas, but what do I *do* and how?' I believe that good instruction should enable one to do more than before, shed light on the 'what' and 'how', and even on the 'why'.

The first book which gave me a tangible foothold was Ajahn Sumedho's short book, *The Four Noble Truths*.[*] It provided an introduction to a practical method of investigation with examples of Ajahn Sumedho's own struggles. Later, when I was staying at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England, I read his other book *Mindfulness: the Path to the Deathless*[**] and found it illuminating as well.

I mention these books here because certain topics are covered in more detail there, and if you are reading this book, they might also be helpful.

Here, I collect advice and teachings that I wish I had read, or someone had told me sooner, during the years since those early books. The right answer remains obscured until we learn how to ask the right question.

[*] The Four Noble Truths (forestsangha.org)
[**] Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless (forestsangha.org)

I included diagrams and illustrations, which communicate on a different channel than words, alongside the prose text. When I start drawing a diagram, I discover relationships between terms which I hadn't thought of before. When I see somebody else's diagrams, they show me how terms are connected on a larger scale, and I ask where that representation can be found on the map of my experience.

Illustrations of the meditation postures were carefully drawn by Madalena Scafuro.

The Venerable Bhikkhu Kovilo carried out a large amount of editing work on the text and converted my Hungarian-flavoured English into native idioms and fluid phrases. I am grateful that they have dedicated their time and energy to the project and this guide is all the better for it. In regards to any part of this book which seem disorienting, unclear or confusing, the responsibility and fault remain with me. Leave those parts behind and return to learning from the Buddha, our incomparable teacher. He taught the timeless truth, the complete ending of suffering, because he had faith in our ability to recognize it.

Over the years, I have received much help and support from my first teachers, who are my parents, and from monastic teachers and friends. We may feel inadequate and not believe that we can ever feel happy, but our teachers believe in us and wish us to succeed, to overcome confusion and flourish in our life. I offer these words in this spirit.

Gambhīro Bhikkhu
2021 November,
Sumedhārāma Buddhist Monastery, Portugal

Breathing

brief *ānāpānasati* method and posture

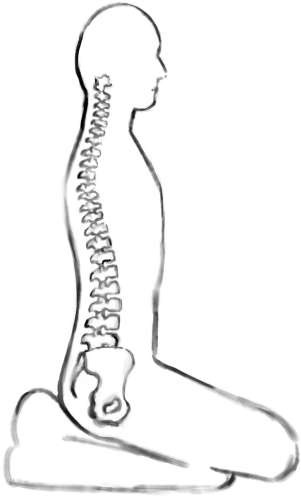
We watch the sensations of the breathing in the body, this alert attention collects the mind around a stable object. The physical sensations in the body are easy to notice as we breathe in- and out. This method is known as *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing.

Why is thinking so exhausting? The mind is jumping from thought to thought, but we don't know where we're going, and so, we never arrive. Restless desire is exhausting. Sense-restraint gathers energy and directs it instead of letting it flow out in every direction. Directing attention to a neutral, steady sensation like the breath slows down the thinking mind.

One may sit on the floor, using a mat and a cushion, or on a chair. Sitting on the floor, find a position which doesn't over-stress the tendons or the knees.

When using a chair, move forward on the seat so that your back is not leaning against the back-rest. A support influences the shape of the spine and the rhythm of the breathing.

Balance the head so that its weight is not pulling forward. Since we often sit on chairs, we have a habit of holding the head in a forward position, which creates tension in the back muscles. When we pull the head backward, we can feel the back muscles relaxing. Pull in the chin slightly, but there is no need to force it.



Sit in a balanced, upright posture, with the shoulders relaxed. In a good posture, the breathing is easy and even.

The bones in the body sit on top of one another like a tower of stones. The hip-bone rests on the cushion, the spine on the hip, the spine disks stacked on one another, with the skull on top, the centre-line of the whole tower carefully held in balance.

When balanced carefully with its weight at the centre, we don't have to hold up the body by pulling or pushing with the strength of muscles. Gravity is enough to keep it upright.

Breathing in, the cold air touches the tip of the nose. Let the abdominal muscles draw in the breath instead of expanding the chest to gain volume. The air moves through the lungs, and the abdomen expands. This way of breathing lowers the heart rate and reduces anxiety. Relaxing the muscles, air leaves through the nostrils. There is no need to control it with precision, it is enough to suggest this rhythm. The body already knows how to breathe, so we take a step back and observe, like watching waves wash in onto the shore, and then recede.

We don't have to tell ourselves what to think and how to feel. If we want clear thoughts, it is best to first be silent and listen. We sit and rest for a little while. When we are silent, either clear thoughts will come on their own, or the mind will be content to stay with the silence.

Restraint and directed attention is necessary for clear, conscious thought – and it brings a peaceful gladness with it. The mind is content and happy, we don't need much internal discussion. Sitting and breathing, listening to the silence is a blameless joy in itself.

We establish a clear intention to stay with the meditation object and leave other matters until a later time. An open attitude is helpful, pushing and forcing ourselves is not sensitive enough to see what is happening. Operating from will-power makes the meditation rigid, and the mind obstructed. Like marching fast with stiff legs, and falling over on small pebbles.

A clear mind and good aspiration feels settled and cool, the attitude is open to change. Forcing and struggling feels busy, hot and narrow in scope.

attitude toward the method, mind is not a coffee machine

Are we learning new facts about the mind by observing the breathing? I remember when I sat down and struggled to understand how to meditate *correctly*. I kept thinking about this, changing my breathing to improve my meditation, expecting that one day I will somehow hit the correct buttons, and breathing in the correct way I will start learning new information, new facts about the mind. It was rather painful and entirely fruitless.

Analysing it for knowledge we miss what is happening. Think about a conversation, when the other person keeps asking "Why?" after your every sentence – the conversation goes nowhere without listening. Overthinking it, we are doing this to ourselves; and no wonder we want to jump up from the cushion and tell our commentating mind to stop and listen in silence.

The instructions from our teachers are a guide for directing attention in a way to discover understanding for ourselves.

We learn from the instructions we read or hear, but trying to follow them *exactly, precisely, correctly* is more like

following a manual to operate a coffee machine: 'If I press this button, it should always make this kind of coffee'.

This attitude is motivated by the desire to control and manipulate our experience, but we experience the frustration because by nature we don't have control over it. We already decided what will happen. We want to see what we *think* should happen, and we don't see what *is* happening, so we think the machine is not working, or we are doing it wrong.

We can remind ourselves that it is possible that we don't know everything. We don't know what is going to happen. Loosen the hold, practice an attitude of stopping and listening.

BUD-DHO mantra, effort and frustration

We may start with practising the BUD-DHO mantra, internally repeating it with the in- and the out-breath. 'Buddho' means 'one who is awake, one who is knows'. It helps to stop and listen.

This wakes up the mind to know itself as it is right now. Waking up is always right – you can't do it wrong. The mind recognizes its own changing nature, the words of thinking are no longer necessary, and attention finds the wordless question which stays with the present.

Effort is necessary, and the obstructions in the mind can make it hard work to not quit the practice. Again and again, we return to the mind which is awake to the present experience to guide effort, rather than wilful pushing towards a goal.

Frustration and disappointment are useful indicators to listen – the best is when we have to learn something we didn't expect to learn, and give attention to a previously neglected area of our mental life.

We don't have to read or remember much. The information we need is little, but developing skill in them requires much practice. Our common mistake is that we don't stop to stay with them, and unpack their significance for recognizing our situation, *what* to do, and *in what way* to do it.

A list of facts, if not integrated, doesn't reach deep enough to deal with root causes in the heart and mind, and have no effect on us. Watching the breath stops us and opens the attention which can do that. Perception and recognition can be gradual, like having to lean close to something to see an essential feature, but every step, which connects our experience with the words of the teachings, is interesting and leads onward.

The Buddha has a simple message for us: wake up, stop holding on, you don't have to suffer. We keep unpacking this, unfolding it wider and wider.

GUIDED MEDITATION

ānāpānasati method, sitting meditation, sitting posture

Adjust how you sit and find a balanced posture: an upright position, in a stable but not tense posture, with the head balanced and not lulling forward. The posture should allow open, easy breathing.

Determine that you are putting down everyday activities for this period. You can respond to interrupting thoughts, 'This is not the right time, I will come back to that when the time is appropriate.' It's a bit longer than 'Go away!', but more friendly to ourselves. This establishes a clear intention in the mind, like when clearing a desk before starting work.

Take a deep breath and watch if you feel tension, something obstructing or limiting the breath. If you feel that the breathing is easy and open, then your posture is suitable. You don't have to sit in a special way.

Pay attention to the physical sensation of breathing. Let the body regulate the breath. We watch and let it relax, giving attention to what is happening now.

Good posture and the calm, easy breathing is a quiet and pleasant feeling, like sitting down on a park bench after a walk. There nothing special to do, and this simple, quiet sitting is a joy in itself.

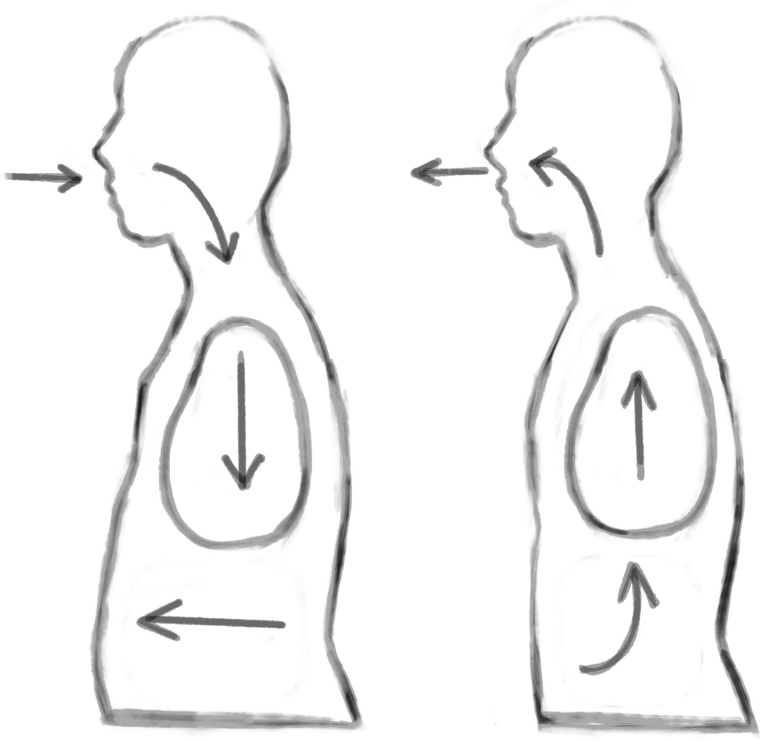
We don't control the breathing so precisely as in a pranayama or yoga exercise, but it is worth noticing the bodily rhythm which drives our breathing.

If the breathing is driven by the expansion and contraction of the chest, as if we were preparing for a great effort, this creates energy to move and produces a more actively thinking mind. It has a calming effect when the diaphragm above the abdomen controls the breathing. Once you find the rhythm of it, let the body continue.

Breathing in, we first feel the air at the nostril. The cold air moves down in the windpipe. The abdomen moves outward, allowing the diaphragm to expand. The chest rises as the air fills the lungs, but we're not expanding the chest to a great volume. Sitting still, we can feel the quiet rhythm of heartbeats.

Breathing out, the muscles relax, the warm air rises through the wind pipe, and leaves through the nose.

It is not necessary to express these steps in thought, relax and watch as the feelings appear in the body. It can take a little while for the body to settle.



The beating of the heart will calm down, and the breathing becomes regular and light.

Allow the body to regulate the breathing on its own. When we approach it with an opinion, that our breathing should be short or long, then it becomes rigid and forceful. We want to discover our experiences, not tell them what they should be.

The body knows how to breathe better than we do. It will breathe with an even rhythm, if we let it. Take a step back and turn the attention around, listening instead of directing. Breathing in, breathing out, what are you feeling in the body?

It is not one specific feeling which you have to experience. The intention is to give the time and allow the space to be with your experience.

Centred within itself, knowing the simplicity of the present moment. The feeling that we have to complete, or fix something, is always an extra, something which we create. We create this expectation that we have to change, we have to fix, we have to control. This is always connected to time, we expect something which should happen.

In the present moment everything is moving, going through change. In the immediate, present experience there are no goals. There are not results to come in the future, there is only *this, here*. The expectations which we produce for ourselves, dissolve, when we turn our attention back and watch the present.

We return to the attention connected to the experience here and now. It recognizes the world through the senses. In this attention the doubts, questions, memories, are

not heavy. They don't have such weight, such urgent importance, which would move us out from the centred balance. This wakeful attention becomes a secure place where we can stay.

There may be a lot of tangled thinking in the mind. Determine what to think, instead of letting the mind run in circles. For example, use the mantra BUD-DHO. On the in-breath, think BUD-, on the out-breath, -DHO. If the thinking doesn't slow down on its own, this puts down a guard rail and speed bumps, so that we stay on track and slow down.

active and calm mind, turbulent emotions, simplicity of the present

Breathing in, staying with the simple experience of the moment: this is enough.

We feel compulsions, desires and anxieties, we feel 'I need this', 'I am like this', 'I should be like that'. They are something we can observe, we don't need to get involved in the story. Staying with the breathing, we can turn attention to the experience that is happening.

Awareness of the body is a solid base, calming and reorganizing what is valuable. If your experience is peaceful, happy and content, stay with that. There is nothing wrong with that. This happiness is not connected to craving, not dependent on having to get or reach something. It arises from seclusion of the senses, returning to simplicity, knowing and staying with the present. The mind is alert, content, and satisfied.

Meditation can bring up turbulent emotions, and that is good. We are seeing what we haven't allowed ourselves to see. Looking for answers or solutions is not necessary while meditating. We don't investigate the emotions on the

level of our personal history, but on a more fundamental level, as states of the mind and heart.

We see ourselves in them, we see them as ours, and we create a person, whose story we want to control. But in the present moment neither the feeling, nor the mind state makes any announcement about whose name they belong to. The suffering and difficulty comes from this attachment and confused perspective. We have to open the mind to the change, and let go of the attachment.

wholesome thoughts, being too serious

Virtue, generosity relaxes the mind, and morality establishes stability. We may think of good actions, what we have given and received. We may recollect people we look up to as good examples with respect.

If you find yourself in a tense, strict and cynical mood, try shifting your posture to relax.

We can get so serious about sitting on a cushion, it is a living joke to look at us. Quietly rub your ears or massage the face muscles using your fingers, this invigorates blood flow. Recollect generosity. In the monastery, often our lay friends are coming to cook and offer the midday meal for the community. They are busy while in the kitchen, and when finished, they are at ease, relaxed and smiling.

The mind can be anxious for results, and recollecting our good actions, even simple and small ones, relaxes that tension. Imagine what would happen, if someone gave you a hundred-times-fold of the results you want, like winning an enlightenment lottery. How are you going to meditate then? Probably much like now, but more relaxed.

Generosity lets us recognize that we already have space, and don't have to push to get ahead of others.

Goodness is present in the world and we can drop the big hurry. It feels joyful to recollect the generosity of our family, relatives and friends, but even seeing a stranger help another stranger brings us to smile.

doubt in meditation, senses turning inward

'How can I do it?' Approach it differently, and ask instead, 'Can I pay attention to it?'

The sensation of breathing stops us. We are back at the beginning, when we didn't know what is going to happen. We are at an empty and spacious place this way, where we are by ourselves and we have time to stop there.

The senses turn inward when watching the breathing. The eye sees colours, but the attention of seeing turns inward, and not seeking colours and forms outside. The ear hears sounds, but the hearing turns inward and is not seeking. The body feels hot and cold, the surface of clothes and the rigid weight of the bones. We watch this while breathing and let the body calm down, let the mind turn inward and grow still.

cool water filling a lake, experience contains the world

Sense-restraint collects our energy and doesn't let it flow away in every direction. Consider a lake which doesn't have inlets or outlets, contained all around by the valley. Its single water-source is a fresh, cool spring in the ground. When it rains, some water will flow into the lake through small channels, but there being no outflow, it will all settle in the lake contained by the valley. The water in the lake remains still, and the cool water from the spring will spread and permeate the entire lake.*

*DN 2, The Fruits of the Ascetic Life

Feelings and the mind are dependent on the body, we can't add to it or take away from it. Experience is complete in every breath, it starts with the body and is going to end with it. This world, made of feelings, is complete in this – it contains everything we are and everything we can ever become.

awareness stops compulsion

When we suffer, we know that there is something we don't understand. We don't understand how one thing is created by another, how one thing is under our control, and another is not.

When we don't see, we repeat the pattern like following a program, and create the same suffering again and again. We complain, 'why does it always happen this way?' We keep doing the same thing, and not see it.

Looking closer, we see that one thing depends on another. Then we can see the option, that we are free to stop doing it. We return to a quiet contentment this way.

restlessness, self-criticism, beginning with good will, flexible attitude

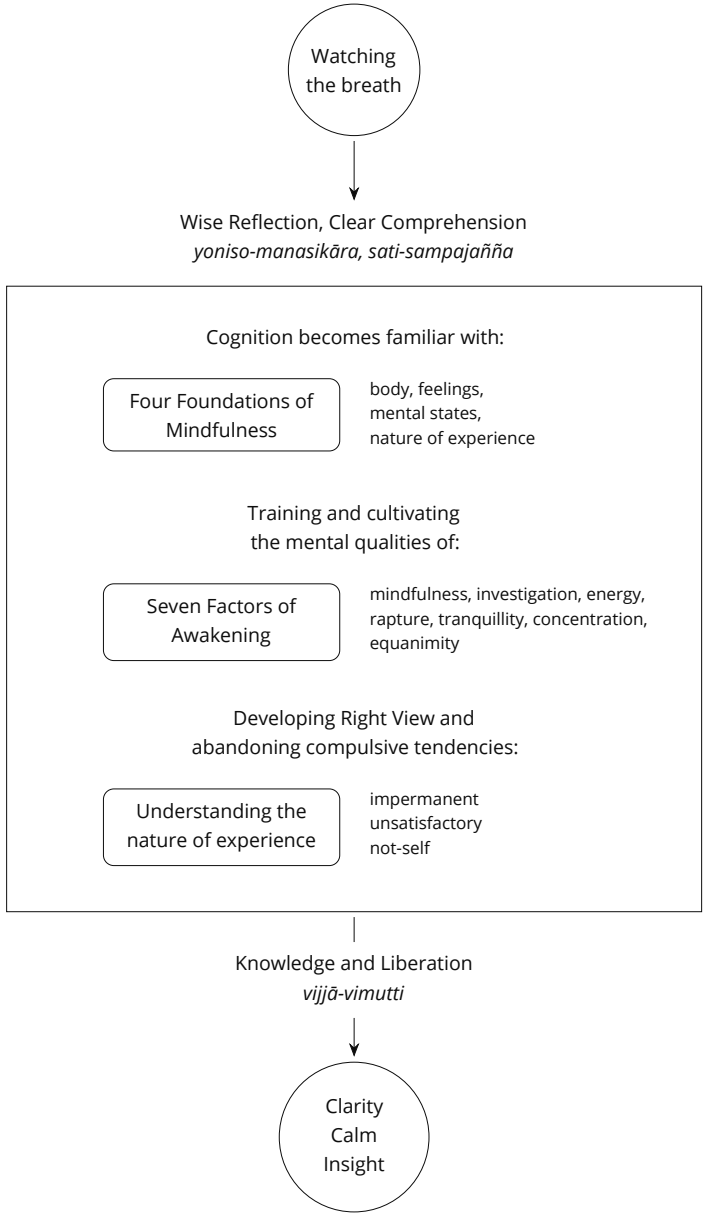
When we have been sitting in meditation for a while, we often start to complicate it. Where does this restlessness come from, can we not stay with something simple? Notice how belief in the simple experience changes. We start thinking about some point or question, and the doubt and self-criticizing stops everything.

Isn't it comical? We can be so committed to our self-criticism, as though it was a transcendental experience to cause ourselves pain. But we feel we should be struggling with *something*, we should crush our ego and let go of everything! Perhaps this is the only way we know, we never thought we could be different.

At the beginning we have good will and flexible attitude to ourselves, but there is only hardness and judgement at the end. The young tree is pliant and fresh, it bends as it grows, but the old tree is hard and dry when it dies.

Return to the beginning, when you had kindness and patience toward the beginner. At the beginning you did not yet expect yourself to know what to do, and relied on listening to see what happens. We don't know what is here until we look and see. That seeing and watching is the fresh knowing. Allow yourself to always be at the beginning.

Figure 1.1: Mindfulness of Breathing (*Ānāpānasati*)



MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING (EXCERPT)

MN 118, Ānāpānasati Sutta

Bhikkhus, when mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it is of great fruit and great benefit. When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it fulfills the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. When the Four Foundations of Mindfulness are developed and cultivated, they fulfill the Seven Factors of Awakening. When the Seven Factors of Awakening are developed and cultivated, they fulfill true knowledge and deliverance.

And how, bhikkhus, is mindfulness of breathing developed and cultivated, so that it is of great fruit and great benefit?

Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu, gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down having crossed his legs, sets his body erect, having established mindfulness in front of him.

Ever mindful he breathes in; mindful he breathes out.

Body

Breathing in & out long, he knows:
'I breathe in & out long';

Breathing in & out short, he knows:
'I breathe in & out short';

He trains thus:
'I shall breathe in & out experiencing the whole body'.

He trains thus:
'I shall breathe in & out tranquillizing the bodily formations'.

Feelings

He trains thus:

'I shall breathe in & out experiencing rapture'.

'I shall breathe in & out experiencing pleasure'.

'I shall breathe in & out experiencing the mental formations'.

'I shall breathe in & out tranquillizing the mental formations'.

Mental States

He trains thus:

'I shall breathe in & out experiencing the mind'.

'I shall breathe in & out gladdening the mind'.

'I shall breathe in & out concentrating the mind'

'I shall breathe in & out liberating the mind'.

Nature of Experience

He trains thus:

'I shall breathe in & out contemplating impermanence'.

'I shall breathe in & out contemplating the fading away of passions'.

'I shall breathe in & out contemplating cessation'.

'I shall breathe in & out contemplating relinquishment'.

Bhikkhus, that is how mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, so that it is of great fruit and great benefit.

Understanding

facts and experience, doubt, accumulating facts

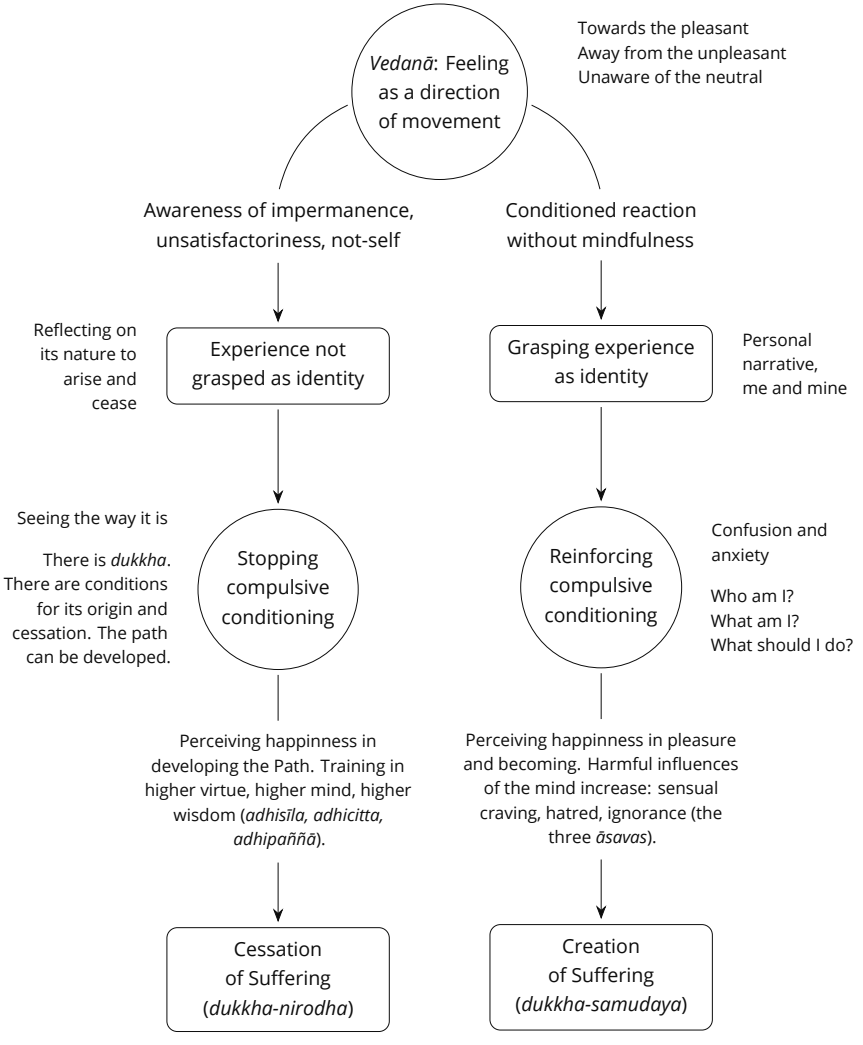
Though we break knowledge into parts and we speak about practice in gradual steps, understanding happens all at once. Perception is immediate – the 'Aha!' moment, when the fog clears. While some information is necessary to begin, we remember that the truth of the teaching is 'to be experienced for oneself'. In meditation practice, the facts which are useful for us are *here-and-now* facts which we can know in our present experience.

If we depend solely on external information or simply wait for some experience to arise, we never arrive at the place where we can stop. This dependence is exhausting. It keeps creating more doubt and mental restlessness. Even though we accumulate more facts, we can become bitter, and this inner feeling of lack grows. It is not more information that we need, but the letting go of that need. Then, we are able to stop in peace.

sense experience, identification

Memories, perceptions and expectations create a force which pushes and pulls on us. While the experiences themselves disappear, the compulsion never rests: we already want the next one. How can these phenomena be so convincing that they keep pulling us forward? What keeps feeding the process is that *we see ourselves in them.* We see them as what we are, what we were, what we are going to be. And since they keep changing and breaking up, we continue on and on, expecting the next one.

Figure 2.1: Feeling and Identification



What if we woke up one morning without any memory of our past? Even in that state, we would still grasp our experience as *me and mine*. It might be so disturbing that we would just lie there paralysed with fear until we were able to grasp some story that could explain where and who we were. In reality, we don't have to lose our memory to witness this: missing an important flight connection or any other time when we can't control our situation can be frightening enough to cause us to feel this way.

It is humbling when we notice how much we take personally, even though intellectually we know we shouldn't. The Buddha teaches that the mind continues to construct 'me and mine' out of sense-experience until the impermanence of this experience is fully comprehended. We are taking it personally if we are convinced that either (1) 'This is me', (2) 'I am in this', (3) 'I am outside of this', (4) 'This is mine', or (5) 'I delight in this'.*

Oh, poor mind, why can't we be wiser? To start with, there is little extra attentional space left when we habitually occupy our minds with thinking about how to get what we want and complaining about what we didn't get.

When the sense-base meets a sense-object, if attention is present, we feel the experience as one of three feelings (*vedanā*), comparable to a direction of movement: toward the pleasant, away from the unpleasant, at peace with the neutral. The untrained mind mechanically follows these established patterns and gets caught up in the underlying tendencies of passion, hatred and unawareness.

* MN 1, The Root of All Things

In this context, one understands feelings when one understands sense-contact. As a result one sees the pleasant as painful (due to its ultimately unsatisfactory nature), sees the painful as a dart (to be removed or endured skilfully), and sees the neutral as impermanent (not being lulled to unawareness).

This implies we don't conceive them as 'me and mine'. We know them, but the knowledge is not *ours*. They don't belong to a person who *has* the feeling.

> Having fully understood feelings,
> He is taintless in this very life.
> Standing in Dhamma, with the body's breakup
> The knowledge-master cannot be reckoned.
>
> *SN 36.5, Should Be Seen*

thinking, being burdened, sense-restraint

We can think a lot about this, but if we are trying to understand it analytically, we will only give ourselves a headache. This understanding has to be developed through the body: a good place to start is through practising sense-restraint.

We guard the sense-doors. Clear comprehension will keep a space, a gap between our awareness and its contents. When seeing a form, hearing a sound, etc. we don't grasp at the experience, neither what we see as a whole, nor at a particular feature we like or dislike. We might like the experience, but we don't become enchanted by it. We might dislike it, but we don't work up anger over it. We can keep part of our awareness on the sensation of breathing, or maintain a broad awareness of the body – this helps to

find an anchor, a stable point, which informs our wisdom faculty. If not the breath, it also works well to notice an aspect of your current activity, such the touch of the pen as you write, the pressure of feet on the ground or other sensations of the body.

This body-based practice is more simple than an intellectual approach. It collects our mental energies and, with natural rhythm, results in either calm stillness or thoughtful reflection.

We can notice that we are able to stop and that what we have with us now is enough. Consider: in terms of objects and information, what have you actually used today? Although you may own much, for one day, a little is enough. We don't need as much as we think and relinquishing is not so much a loss, as a relief from a burden. In this restraint we find strength and energy which had previously been consumed by distracted desire. Restraint is always at hand. It is not threatened by external factors.

This is like learning how to pack less in your backpack for a hike. After some experience, you can't even comprehend why you needed to carry so much. Virtue is action that leads to happiness, and it can be directed towards ourselves: relinquishment is one such personal virtue. Understanding informs this virtue, and the happiness born from it further supports trust in that understanding.

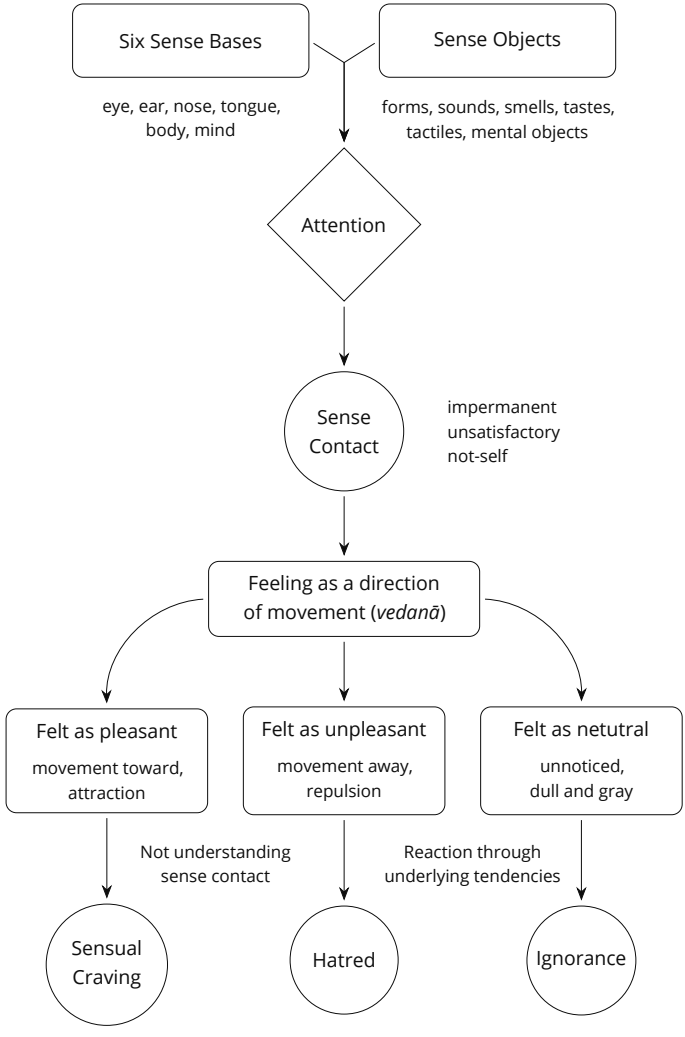
ānāpānasati, sense contact, sensation, feeling

We watch the breathing, and observe how the senses operate. The eye sees forms, and a sensation appears. The ears hear sounds; the body feels solidity, hot and cold. If there is contact between a sense-door and a sense-object, sensation is going to arise. The process doesn't depend on us, if there is contact, we can't choose for the sensation not to arise. When the contact between a sense-door and a sense-object is broken, sensation ceases. The arising and ceasing of phenomena dependent on contact – this was our experience. Although we may have a measure of control over our movements, other than that, we don't have a say in the process of experience: it is not about us.

When we don't notice this, we think that the sensation is ours. If the sensation feels good, we expect we are going to get something from it and so we cling to it. This incorrect understanding of things underlies our neediness and anxiety. When our expectations are disappointed, our tendency is to assume that we did something wrong or that somebody else made a mistake. We then go and search for some other experience which will be more right, hoping that this new one doesn't play out like before.

Observing sense-contact this way, feelings are no longer attractive or repulsive. Instead, we see that neither inclination is stable or reliable. This is not numbness. In meditation we turn toward experience, not away from it. We cultivate attention with sensitive equanimity. Though we remain alert and responsive to the experience, it no longer controls and disturbs us. We remain calm.

Figure 2.2: Sense Contact and Feeling



self-narrative, self-description

How does this affect the way we narrate experiences to ourselves? We explain to ourselves that some feeling was good or bad and we describe how we should think about it. The central element of this narration is *our feelings*, and its primary thrust is how to get more of the good ones.

What happens when we realize that both the good and bad feelings we experience are unstable and unreliable, and that their arising and ceasing are not in within our control? Our internal values are re-ordered, guided by impermanence, rather than craving.

changing nature, wise reflection

Usually we only start to pay attention once we have noticed that something is wrong, or that something hurts, or that we are suffering. We don't feel a great need to explain pleasant experiences, do we? We can use the sense of frustration, the unsatisfactoriness and the proliferative thinking as a sign to start mindfully investigating.

Mentally take a step back and observe that the experience is a process which arises, persists in change, and ceases. Ask yourself: 'Where in the body do I feel this sensation? Can I remember when it started? Can I see how it changes? Can I catch it as the feeling ceases?'

Although we can't control the world around us, our attitude influences what we see as being free choices. Our perspective opens or closes the doors toward the actions we see as possible. These actions create the situations in which we live and influence how we see ourselves therein. Without reflecting on the nature of our experience, we will be inclined to see pleasant feelings as a reward and unpleasant feelings as punishment, and the meaning of our lives will revolve around these. Our inner world will

constantly revolve around the questions of: 'Who am I … How do I … Why do I … What should I …' And doesn't that feel like a burden better left behind?

Wise- and unwise reflection are terms in the *suttas*,[*] making a distinction between a superficial attention that increases our confusion, and thorough investigation that leads to clarity and correct understanding. Unwise reflection misses the signs of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not self, hence getting caught up in taking everything personally. Wise reflection notices these characteristics of sense-experience, and investigates in line with the Four Noble Truths.

attachment to self, dog tied to a post, reflection

Do you remember, how a dog, tied to a post with a leash is running round-and-round its post? It sits, stands, walks or runs around it, but everything it does is around that post.[**] This ego-driven proliferation is the same. Although it keeps us busy, we remain attached to the self at the centre, not being able to go anywhere else. The leash is the identification and clinging (*upādāna*), the process of formulating 'me and mine' in-, or around sense-experience, which in truth has no such essential attribute. This leads us to unwise reflection centred on who we are, what becomes of us, increasing our doubt and confusion.

Questions rooted in 'me and mine' are a trap. They drag us on and on without ever leading to freedom or stopping. If we find ourselves tied to a post, what are we to do? Cutting the leash seems a good idea.

[*] MN 2, All the Taints
[**] SN 22.100, A Leash

In the context of meditation, reflection doesn't necessarily include all kinds of thinking. Not all thoughts are productive for insight. In reflective meditation, we break down our experience into cause-and-effect processes using the Four Noble Truths* as a guide.

This begins with an experience that is personally easy to identify: suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness, or *dukkha* in the Pali language. The direction of thought is not towards *my suffering* as a personal history, but instead, observing it as an impersonal, natural process.

dukkha

The starting position is to recognize that stress or suffering *is* here. As information, this is trivial: yes, there is stress and suffering in the world. But when we ourselves experience it, we rather like to pay attention to something else, or we tend to blame somebody else for it. We will do any number of things rather than becoming conscious of it and deal with it.

The instruction here is that the way forward is to turn toward suffering and to investigate it. We seek a way of understanding. This is the First Noble Truth in the teaching of the Buddha: there is suffering, and the noble attitude is to turn toward it and understand it.

What do we understand? That this suffering is the result of earlier causes and didn't arise from nothing. Examining our situation this way, we are not helpless. Though we may not understand every little aspect of our condition, it is already a relief to realize that we are, perhaps, able to change something.

*SN 56.11, Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma

origin of dukkha

The Second Noble Truth points out that the cause of suffering is in ourselves. It is our wish that experience were otherwise than its nature dictates. It is our tight clinging to what is impermanent, fragile and not possible to keep. The suffering, the *dukkha* that we experience depends on that clinging and thirsty craving. The instruction, the noble attitude here is to let go of this thirsty craving and clinging because clinging to transitory experiences is suffering.

cessation of dukkha

With the cessation of the cause, the result – the suffering – ceases as well. The good news is that the end of suffering is also found within ourselves.

From this perspective, we can see that the mind creates the kind of world we live in. If we watch it, we at least have a chance to not make the situation worse. And who knows, we might make it better?

The Third Noble Truth directs our attention toward this: there is a solution; we are not obliged to live in bitterness and meaningless struggle. The advice, the noble attitude is to practise and experience this for ourselves through understanding and letting go of attachment. In this way, we allow the suffering to cease.

Even if we can't fully let go right away, it is already a relief to see that this connection is true: 'If I could let go, I wouldn't suffer from it'. This is already half the work. Until this point, we have been wandering without a map. But now there is a way forward.

path of practice

The Fourth Noble Truth describes the practice of the path. The Buddha divided it into eight factors, which incorporate the situations of everyday life and the development of meditation.

The parts of the Eightfold Path are (1) understanding, (2) intention, (3) speech, (4) action, (5) livelihood, (6) effort, (7) mindfulness and (8) concentration. When a factor is aligned with the truth, we call it *right*: Right Understanding, Right Intention and so on. Breaking the path down into parts helps investigation and makes it is easier to understand, but the path factors are not separate: they strengthen and support one another. The practice is realized as an integrated whole.

When we most need the practice, we need it *fast.* We can't stop to count factors. The most useful tools are those which are portable and most easily accessible in a given situation. When we read and ponder the meaning, we have time to turn the words this way and that. This is the stage of study. But mindful attention as an abstract idea doesn't help much, it is most valuable when practised, when it is at hand in the present moment.

We always return here. We remember the past and plan for the future, but remembering is a present experience, and planning is a present experience. We don't practice meditation for a future state. If we see understanding, freedom, happiness and overcoming obstacles as some future state, we only have more burdens. Letting go takes place in the present, where states are changing without us.

ALL THE TAINTS (EXCERPT)

MN 2, Sabbāsava Sutta

(Abandoning the taints is for one who knows wise attention)

Bhikkhus, I say that the destruction of the taints is for one who knows and sees, not for one who does not know and see. Who knows and sees what? Wise attention and unwise attention. When one attends unwisely, unarisen taints arise and arisen taints increase. When one attends wisely, unarisen taints do not arise and arisen taints are abandoned.

(The uninstructed person falls into the thicket of views)

This is how he attends unwisely:

'Was I in the past? Was I not in the past?'

'What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past?'

'Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future?'

'What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future?'

Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the present thus:

'Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?'

When he attends unwisely in this way, one of six views arises in him.

The view 'self exists for me'
arises in him as true and established;
'no self exists for me'
'I perceive self with self'

'I perceive not-self with self'
'I perceive self with not-self'
'It is this self of mine that speaks and feels and experiences here and there the result of good and bad actions; but this self of mine is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and it will endure as long as eternity.'

This speculative view, bhikkhus, is called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views, the contortion of views, the vacillation of views, the fetter of views. Fettered by the fetter of views, the untaught ordinary person is not freed from birth, ageing, and death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair; he is not freed from suffering, I say.

(The noble disciple reflects wisely)

He attends wisely:
'This is suffering';
'This is the origin of suffering';
'This is the cessation of suffering';
'This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.'

When he attends wisely in this way, three fetters are abandoned in him: personality view, doubt, and adherence to rules and observances. These are called the taints that should be abandoned by seeing.

(Conclusion)

Bhikkhus, when for a bhikkhu the taints that should be abandoned by seeing … restraining … using … enduring … avoiding … removing … developing, have been abandoned, then he is called a bhikkhu who dwells restrained with the restraint of all the taints. He has severed craving, flung off the fetters, and with the complete penetration of conceit he has made an end of suffering.

(translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi)

Cycles

steps in practice, descriptions and awareness

Meditation teaches understanding through attention to feelings and experiences in the present. The instructions often describe a step-by-step development, but in the present, only one moment is available to us. Are we taking a step forward or backward? Either way, the experience is one step at a time, the step where everything is changing. We use words to describe experience, but awareness of that experience is wordless. Mindful attention is actively looking inward as if asking a question, but not expecting an answer. The symbols of language are limiting. While they consist of fixed representations, the experience is in motion.

Perfecting the steps of the instruction is not the purpose of meditation. The purpose is clear knowing of present experience, this restores right perspective. We can develop the impression that we must always complete the same sequence of steps, and when the mind doesn't develop according to that sequence, we feel disappointed.

narrating mind, experience as the basis, choosing the right paint

And worse, other people seem to be meditating peacefully! They must have got it right! The practice brings self-doubt to the surface. We may consider it from the other direction: Someone might compliment us, 'You looked so peaceful, I'm sure you know something!' But, knowing how much distracted thinking was going on in our head, we can see how unreliable these impression are.

The narrating mind keeps mechanically making comments which are devoid of any depth or investigation. The value of taking this step back is in getting a taste for how unreliable and uncertain your own thinking mind is, even when you think 'I'm sure about this!'

Turn that attitude around and start with experience. Begin with a questioning, curious attention that wordlessly inquires about the present. If we take our experience as the basis, the way this experience is now, what understanding does that give us?

We look at ourselves first – how are we feeling? what state are we in? – and respond intelligently to that with cultivating our meditation in the right direction. When painting a wall, we look at the wall first, choose the right paint for it, and *then* follow the advice on the paint can. The wrong kind of paint will peel off, won't it? There are times when we need to calm down, other times we need to generate energy and effort, or wait for an internal storm to pass.

The various steps of any meditation technique are a method of learning through imitation. Following an example, we watch ourselves and see how our minds work. When we feel suffering, either we are able to resolve it or we wait it out with patient endurance until it ends. Once it passes, we look back with a clear head, knowing what had happened and by what cause, and our understanding of the practice will grow. We have learned something there, and we don't need to hold on to the details of the introductory example.

development in cycles

This would be a simple task, if our meditation practice developed along a straight line, in direct proportion to the minutes and hours spent practising. We plan that we are going to sit down, perhaps a bit distracted at the beginning, but after an hour, *if we are good meditators*, we are going to feel stillness and our mind is going to be clear and focused. At least this is what we expect.

Later, as we recollect how the meditation went, we observe that this is not what happens. Our experience doesn't develop in a linear way from shallow to deep or from distracted to focused. We might think that this is our fault, because we are not 'good meditators', or because we are not doing the steps 'right'.

As soon as we try to follow a technique step-by-step, everything starts happening differently from our expectations. We might think, 'Am I not trying hard enough?' We put more force into it, but it only gets more painful. This is the feeling of trying to fit an opinion onto the experience.

If we look back at how our experience changes over time, we see a different pattern. Experiences arise, change, cease, and are followed by other experiences. The mind develops in cycles like this, and these cycles ignore our goals of wanting to develop our meditation like a rank ladder. The commenting mind tries to fit a personal story onto the experience, about us being somebody who is good or bad at meditation.

Instead, we can take our experience as ground truth and start from there. What kind of experience is this? We can notice how attention moves as a process in consciousness and how it progresses through different cycles.

Initially, the mind is content to sit, resting with relaxed attention, just like when sitting down on a bench after a walk: sitting and breathing is peace complete. But thoughts start coming up and we follow them. We stop and remain content with the stillness again, thinking might even stop without us noticing that we are not thinking. But attention starts moving and we notice ourselves thinking again. Memories, desires and restlessness can come up and we notice we have to work on these. Then, the mind is again content and returns to the feeling of stillness.

knowledge and knowing, naming process, knowledge is not ours

Some knowledge is necessary, but a little is enough. Remembering the teachings of the Buddha is a treasure which doesn't run out. But the insights and understanding doesn't become *our knowledge*, as something we own from that point on. We can't put the truth in a box and store it for next time, instead, we continue recognizing it in the present. When we create fixed ideas from what we think we already know, the practice looses touch with reality. Every time we start again from the beginning, and from there, we trust the present knowing.

Facts and statements are attractive to the thinking mind, we feel a kind of security in reciting facts. We would like to say, 'I had a good meditation', 'I had a bad meditation.' We want to create distinctions and to name our experience.

This is the dissatisfied mind. It wants to become something, it wants to arrive at a state and have a name. But there is nowhere it likes to stop. It goes on and on until we notice that, in this constant running, we are completely exhausted.

When it becomes apparent that we are the ones doing this, the naming stops. It stops because seeing replaced not-seeing; knowing replaced ignorance. Consciously seeing the naming is enough to stop the compulsion from continuing.

In the present, everything is changing, nothing is static. Everything moves, experience is turning and flowing. It doesn't pose for a photo and wait for us to name it. In this change, the doubtful and anxious questions, identity and goals dissolve and lose their meaning. Using the phrase in the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*: 'One dwells independent, not clinging to anything in the world.'*

This is enough, knowing the mind this way we stop and arrive at a place where we can be grateful for being. Not a for anything in particular. Being grateful that there is experience, knowing, clarity, and the freedom which allows us to stop going towards more and more.

ambiguity, limited symbols, knowing without naming, feelings with no edges

In a balanced posture, the subtle feelings of the body are easier to observe. With a curious attitude, we direct attention inward. We don't know ahead of time what we are going to find.

Both the sensations of the body appear, and the feelings which accompany the knowing. We experience them but they often don't have clear boundaries. They don't have edges, or a definite shape. We try to find words for them, but they don't fit. We are not sure what to call them.

All symbols which could be used as a name are lacking. In our western culture, we have strong trust in facts, and

* MN 10, Mindfulness Meditation

we like to return to that security through terminology by giving things a name. We are not familiar with the types of cognitive processes which don't use names and fixed symbols. Although the feelings and the experience as a whole are not precisely defined, we know that this experience is present.

This way we can distinguish the naming process from the experience itself. The subtle feelings in the body are nebulous, they don't have clear boundaries. While breathing in and breathing out, we can experience what the body as a whole feels like – everywhere at once. The whole body is breathing. There is feeling and experience, but there are no names and clear boundaries.

We drop the naming process and recognize that we can know these feelings as they are present. The knowing mind is glad to widen its scope and include experience without filters. We can know what experience is like without having to find a name for it.

contemplating the mind, too much thinking

Accompanying unwholesome mental states, we can notice sensations of heat, restlessness, dissatisfaction and anxiety. We remember to turn toward it with patience, and maintain endurance while this state goes through its stages. This too will change, this too will end, and we can wait for it. When we know where we are, in most cases this is enough. Processes in the mind will change on their own. If we are not putting fuel on the fire, it will burn up what it has and will go out on its own.

Resolution and repetition are part of the practice, but in striving towards a specific goal, the effort becomes bitter and tedious. 'Is this complete awakening yet? Or at least a bit? When is the meditation bell going to ring?' Don't look for a state. The mind which tries to become awakened is overcomplicating the situation.

Present experience is always simple, and mindful attention has a capacity for wise understanding. In this practice, we keep returning to it, this is what guides the effort.

We can't force this by will, and we can't guarantee what will happen: we have to trust the process. What remains is a wholesome mind which understands what is happening. We are not rushing with compulsion nor forcing our way through things. After the difficulty, we have space for gratitude to appear. We can appreciate the feeling of coolness and the comfort of being at ease.

integrated practice

We look at our teachers as examples. They didn't meditate to achieve some special state and then look for something else to do. Meditation was not separate from, but was integrated into their lives. In examples from the suttas, the traditional scriptures of Buddhism, the Venerable Sāriputta was practising with the perception of emptiness.* The Buddha is portrayed as maintaining his mind in concentration on the signless. This is how they continued to meditate.

*MN 151, The Purification of Alms

Boat

walking meditation method

Walking meditation is a more energetic alternative to the sitting posture. Find a path, or an area with enough free space to take a few steps, walking back-and-forth. Even though we are walking, our attention is directed inward. We are not walking *to* some place, we are using the walking posture to develop the mind.

An outdoors, private location is ideal, but indoors in a large enough room is also good.

Determine two points with a clear path between. This could be two trees, or a couple of pieces of furniture. A short path might be fifteen paces, a longer one about thirty paces long. Stand at one end, and start stepping toward the other end mindfully with a clear intention to stay with your meditation object, such as the breath, or the physical sensations of the moving body. Keep your gaze lowered, looking at a few steps in front of you. At the other end of the path, stop and wait for a couple of breaths. Keeping your intention immersed in the meditation, turn around, and start walking in the other direction.

Hold your hands in a way that allows you to maintain the continuous inner attention. Most people prefer clasping the hands in front. It is not the exact position that matters, but slinging the hands around tends to be distracting.

Adjust your walking speed to suit your energy level and meditation object. Some people do walking meditation with fast and determined steps, other people take slow and careful steps. The suitable speed may change even during one session. Experience the variations and find what suits your practice and mental background at that time and place.

manipulating feelings, self-importance

Walking meditation used to stress me out. I believed that it was useful, but that the technique was too loose and didn't involve precise enough details about how to do it. I felt I wanted a checklist to go through and verify if I was doing it right or not.

I kept wanting to walk *to somewhere* so that I would *feel different*. I would start a walking meditation session between two trees, but it felt like I was not doing anything, so I kept changing how I walked to manipulate how I was feeling. 'Walk faster, that will be it. Slow down, and focus. Try breathing like this, and stepping like that, until it feels different.'

It was also important that other people saw that I was doing something important. So I would walk back-and-forth until I started to wear a visible track in the grass on the ground. That was the proof, 'I have done something, I can see it, and *they* can see it!'

Notice how much this kind of struggle is driven by the question, 'How can I feel better about myself?' The motivation is centred on *manipulating* feelings, not on *understanding* them, how they arise and cease. Self-importance is not a helpful attitude for practice. Our desire identifies some external sign and it becomes terribly important for us

to see it, and to let others see it as well. That *important* track in the grass I made (which probably disappeared by next dawn) is one example. Articulating it to ourselves when this is happening already changes our attitude toward the process.

A helpful attitude to practice can be to approach it as if we were doing something completely ordinary, but to bring along a sense of exploration and to remember that the benefit is not a wordly goal, there aren't any stakes to win or to lose. It can also help to *reduce* the meditation time. It's impressive to do three hours of continuous walking meditation, but the pressure becomes stressful. How about ten minutes of meditation? Although it's not major news, it might be fun and interesting.

stopping thinking, mindfulness in the head, internal monologue, control, ordinary practice

Thinking tends to be strong and self-oriented when we see mindfulness, consciousness, or meditation as something happening in our head. From that perspective, mindfulness becomes something 'I have to do in my brain'.* This undersells mindfulness as being merely a rag-doll in the puppet theatre of the brain. Although that picture suits our favourite idea that we are in control of the show, it is a narrow view of reality.

Cognition is a much more complex and more inclusive system of processes than that. You can notice how your attention, or whole personal attitude can change, for example when moving from one building to the next, or from indoors to outdoors. Your body responds being in a new environment, the different social context changes

*Cf. Chapter 4, 'Mindfulness Mania' in Why I Am Not a Buddhist by Evan Thompson

your behaviour, a large number of internal and external factors are involved in creating the perception you experience as 'my mind'. Cognition, or the mind, includes a networked system of processes operating in unison, taking incoming signals from a wide area around our bodies. As we experience more of it as it is happening, it becomes apparent that we don't have the cords to pull on and make the mind dance to our will.

The thinking and reasoning mind is an instrument which we use for a motivating purpose. It's not the 'good reason' which motivates us, it's the motivation which makes us find a good reason. Don't try to get to the end of thinking, notice what is motivating you to think. Letting that go, the thinking will be let go. The inner rumination can be a form of comforting oneself, imagining as if we had control in a certain situation, or trying to regain control over something which already happened. This is like thinking about the rain: it is going to rain whether we are thinking about it or not.

If we *can* do something useful about a problem, that's satisfying to know. If we can't, because it is completely beyond our control, at least we can know that, and give up chewing ourselves about it.

Thinking tends to have a focused verbal object. When we shift into a wider, more fluid mode of attention, however, the mind can't put words to it, and we change into a non-verbal, wordless mode; we perceive the world around us through this.

The state of non-thinking seems to receive a mystical air, like an advanced stage of meditation. We don't ask

other meditators how much they use internal self-talk, do we? When you put the question to people, it turns out that some people don't conduct an internal monologue at all.* It's a shocking surprise to them when they find out that other people talk to themselves in their head. Others self-talk occasionally, while still others do it continuously without a break. It is a spectrum, like various positions on a dial. Personally we are used to doing a particular level of self-talk, but the level at which we engage this mental faculty is a habit we can adjust.

If you feel caught in thinking while walking, expand your area of awareness to include a wider field of cognition. Remember the attitude of gentle listening, directing attention away from the eyes and the head.** Keep your eyes lowered on the walking path in front of you. You can visualize seeing in all directions with your body, or seeing the path with your feet, through the sensations of touch and pressure. Open your attention to encompass the entire body as one moving sensation. Open attention further out to the immediate environment of the walking path.

Short meditations which fulfil their purpose are better than long periods spent with anxiety about the clock. The purpose is not generating more stress. The purpose is clarity of mind and being at ease. Practising, staying with, abiding and dwelling in the space where stress is relaxed.

* Not Everyone Conducts Inner Speech (psychologytoday.com)

** Cf. page 117, Gently Listening in Alert to the Needs of the Journey by Ajahn Munindo (forestsangha.org)

observing experience, sense-contact

At the beginning of a meditation session, we collect our attention by watching the breathing, or the physical sensations of walking step-by-step. We can't expect alertness and balanced intelligence from an agitated, excited mind, and so establishing at least some calmness is essential.

The calm mind is suitable for investigation. What can a happy person learn from the teaching of the Buddha? What can an unhappy person learn? Or, what about someone who just feels okay with nothing else special going on?

We are observing our experience, the signs of impermanence, the beginning and ending of feelings and thoughts, and how they appear, change and disappear. Investigating for ourselves gives the words of the teachings meaning and direct usefulness.

Our experiences manifest through the senses. Forms and colours are perceived by the eye; sounds by the ear; smells by the nose; tastes by the tongue; touch, hot and cold by the body; and the mind perceives thoughts, memories, and other mental processes.

three feelings, impermanence

The experiences appear to us in three qualities, or feelings (*vedanā*): They may be pleasant, and we feel attracted to them; they may be unpleasant, and we would rather distance ourselves from them; or they may be neutral, and their presence doesn't bother us. An aspect of the neutral feelings is that they, like the breath, can be experienced as pleasant when we pay attention to them.

The appearance and cessation of the experience are not within our direct control. The necessary condition for feeling is the contact between a sense-base, a sense-object, and the attention which is directed there. With this contact

established, the sensation appears on its own. When the sense-contact breaks, or our attention turns somewhere else, the sensation disappears.

The happy person who is experiencing pleasant sensations can learn from investigating them. The attractive impression leads us to cling to the pleasant sensation, if we forget that this dependent condition is unreliable. The sensations don't belong to us. It is not possible to keep, it has no deeper essence, it is empty of self.

The unhappy person who is experiencing unpleasant, painful sensations, can understand that this condition is not going to last. We can see that it is superfluous to wind ourselves up with anger or hatred. When action is required, we act, when waiting with patience is enough, we wait.

The person who feels they are living in a neutral, grey world, can avoid to give themselves over to carelessness and foggy confusion. This neutral condition is not going to be permanent either, and if we make errors through lack of alertness, the result can be painful and dangerous. It can be like running into a wall or falling into a hole in the fog.

The impermanence and emptiness fundamentally changes our view, it reorganizes our values.

The Buddha described feelings as, 'all things converge on feeling.' The eye sees forms, the ear hears sounds, the body feels touch, and so on. The sense-base makes contact with the sense-object. If attention is present, there is contact, and the result is the feeling.

Feeling draws our attention to it like a magnet. Remembering the sequence in the suttas:

Rooted in desire, friend, are all things.
Born of attention, are all things.
Arising from contact, are all things.
Converging on feeling are all things.

AN 10.58, Rooted

feeling as not-self, feelings as bubbles, overcoming anger

This is the point where we complicate the matter. If we see it as a transient, unreliable phenomena, we don't make a problem out of it. We don't form attachments, craving doesn't have a basis to arise and we don't become stressed. The Buddha compared feeling to the bubbles on the surface of the water when it is raining heavily.* They appear quickly, and disappear. How could there be anything in a bubble which we can hold onto?

But our ingrained habit is to assume that this feeling is 'me', or 'mine'. From that, craving is born, either a desire to have more of it or the desire to get rid of it. While we are spending our time reacting to attraction and repulsion, the underlying compulsive tendencies (sensual craving, hatred and delusion, i.e. the three *āsavas*) are fuelled and grow stronger in the mind.

There seems to be a lot of cleaning-up to do in the mind, but it's worth it. Overcoming anger, for example, is an extremely productive part of practice. It is an easy mental state to recognize and hence an easy target to shoot at. Even small progress gives us an inner understanding about ourselves and the way the Buddhist practice works.

*SN 22.95, A Lump of Foam

The effects of anger are painful, it makes us sick, we lose our intelligence, and it is destructive both to our personal and professional relationships. Greed tends to be sticky, we know we shouldn't but we still want it; in confusion we are lost; we fear getting close to fear; but it is easy to want not being enraged. Being free from anger is a relief, and every step of progress makes the next step easier. Once our head cools down, what remains is a sense of self-respect and the resolution to practice.

fear and anxiety

If we are in a dangerous or uncertain situation, naturally we begin thinking about what should we do. Fear and anxiety are going to arise because there is good reason for it. The emotion of fear carries the information of possible danger, the emotion of anxiety implies an uncertain outcome. Fear makes us cautious, and this is useful: I wouldn't want to ride in a car with a driver who is not afraid of crashing.

What should we expect from meditation? We might think that *if we were good meditators* we would be able to stop the fear and anxiety. If we could just apply the right technique or remember the right words, these annoying mind states would disappear. Notice in this motivation the desire which strives for control. We are wishing for our situation to be different from the way it is, to manipulate and end it.

Our attitudes influence the direction the feeling develops. Certainly, we can make it worse. All the while, we are internally debating with ourselves, imagining the situation to play out one way or another. The internal dialogue of anxiety is a form of trying to control the events around

us. We try re-interpreting what we see in a way that fits our earlier view of the situation. Once such a feeling has already appeared, though we can't change or fix it, we are still part of the process. Awareness of the mind state keeps it within safe bounds, but gives it space to let it run its course and end.

When I am waiting for my luggage at the airport, I feel anxious – did they lose my luggage? I have done all I needed to do, and there is nothing more I can do now. I feel anxiety because the situation is, in reality, uncertain. As a practice, I recollect that I have enough space to stay with this feeling. There is no need to hurry things up, the anxiety can stay as long as it needs to be there.

We can't stop it, but we can stop making it worse. If there is a danger, we do what is necessary. If there is no danger at the moment, but we feel anxiety, we can understand that *the anxiety is not the danger*, and we can mindfully stay present without fear of the feeling.

contemplating the body, simplify the method, slowing down thinking, BUD-DHO

How does the feeling appear, when observed through the body? Where do we feel it? When did it start? Is it changing? As a feeling in the body, is it that bad? This type of investigation will not give us control, but it develops an understanding that the feeling is not the danger, and we don't have to continue the internal fight for control.

If the thoughts are not slowing down, we can occupy the thinking mind with a thought which we determine, instead of allowing it to run in every direction. A mantra, such as 'BUD-DHO' can be used in this case. It is a simple method to collect our scattered attention and make it fit to work for our benefit.

If meditation feels too complicated, simplify it down to the essence. Lots of complicated steps only increase the sense of unfamiliarity and doubt.

One breath, one BUD-DHO. On the in-breath, we internally recite the first half of the mantra, BUD-. The breath pauses in the middle for a moment. On the out-breath we recite the other half, -DHO. BUD-DHO.

The essence is the understanding which stops you, and leaves peace where 'you' had been. The peace originates from the senses withdrawing, and the flow of attention turning inwards. The seeking stops, because what is here is enough, and there is no need to go anywhere.

sadness at emptiness

The first impression of emptiness can be focused on loss, and we feel sadness. With experience we learn to recognize more refined aspects of emptiness, in which we don't own, but haven't lost anything: this emptiness is liberating.

When the wordly goals turn out to be empty and not as important as we thought, there can be a feeling of sadness, disorientation, we're not sure which way to continue.

This is like being unsure about ourselves when waking up, a new world taking the place of the dream. After the disorientation passes, a quiet joy arises in the mind. The ongoing wakefulness recognizes the happiness in the present. Our values reorganize themselves. We don't look for external strength and security, because dependent conditions are uncertain, unsatisfactory, and their pursuit without end is tedious.

Who is suffering? This experience, how is it changing? Where is the peace now? Where is the understanding now? Experience is not a problem to solve. Awareness stays with the experience and comprehends it.

Turn attention to the moment before you ask the question: Who is asking whom? This the trick of the narrating mind. It imagines there is somebody to talk to, somebody to criticize or complain to. But the voice speaking into the microphone, the questioner and the respondent are one and the same, and between question and answer there is neither: only the listening.

stories of the world, BUD-DHO

BUD-DHO, breathing in, breathing out: the stories of the world are not interesting for us. When the questioning attention stops the words in the mind, this is enough. Listening silence fills the pause, and the answer is the present experience.

Meditation based on the breath and BUD-DHO is easy to adapt to informal situations. In everyday situations, whether by using a mantra, or wordlessly, simplify the practice until you can clearly recognize the right attitude. The simple practice of watching the breath doesn't add any more complications to the comings and goings of the world. We don't have to solve experience, it is enough to watch and listen.

tudong story, self-criticism, self-support, aversion subverting Dhamma

One time I was on a walk, out in the countryside, wandering from town to town with a backpack. I was sleeping in a small tent, and going alms-round each day at the nearest village in the hope of receiving some food for the day. We call this practice *tudong*. I printed maps on A4 sheets of paper, on which I would usually write notes as well. I had been walking for a few days at that point, tracking on the paper which paths I followed; noting where I found good camping spots; marking where I received alms-food in the villages; and so on. It is a kind of travel

log or journal. When I get back to the monastery, I scan the maps and type up the notes.

This was a rainy and windy day, and I was walking in the middle of nowhere on a muddy road. I sat down to rest, and I thought, 'Let's mark up this last section of the route on the map.' I took a look in the plastic folder where I kept the maps, and I could see today's map, but yesterday's map was not there. *I've lost yesterday's map.* With all the notes.

I must have dropped it sometime earlier when pulling out today's map for a look. It could be kilometres behind me, in the mud somewhere, or the wind may have blown it into some corner. I kept thinking, 'I've lost yesterday's map. I can't believe I've lost my map.' I felt so shaken, it was comically absurd. I hadn't realized how much I treasured these little notes, it felt like I'd lost a part of my life. I couldn't remember the last time I was so disappointed.

The Sun was going to set soon, and I still had a lot of distance to walk. The next morning I had to reach the next town, otherwise I wouldn't be able to go alms-round, which would mean I wouldn't be eating that day. (The monk's rules don't allow us to store food from one day to the next.)

So I couldn't easily turn around and start tracing my way back. I was sitting there, thinking, 'I should let go. It's just some notes. This is just a state of mind, a good monk would let go.'

But all that didn't sit right. I thought, 'What am I afraid of? Why is it wrong to like that piece of paper? Why is it OK to criticise myself and push toward the next goal, but not OK to be even a bit self-supportive? I love doing what I do, and I'm going back for my map!'

I found it about 500 meters behind me. It was floating in a puddle, soaked, but intact. I lifted it from the water as carefully as if it were an archaeological artefact. I rolled it up in a towel and it eventually dried.

Meeting such obstacles is a fruitful practice. That day I learned more than I volunteered for. It was almost dark by the time I found a place to camp but everything was well. The next day I did get to the town in time for alms-round, and a man and two ladies offered me food for the day.

The values we grow up with in Western culture make it readily acceptable to think critical, judgmental thoughts about ourselves. When we say, 'he is his own worst critic', this sounds hard, but it is something we praise. Certain Buddhist terminology fits right in with this, 'Give up your desires! You shouldn't have preferences! Everything is not self! Let it go!' This mode of attention operates from self-aversion, it subverts the Dhamma in order to beat ourselves up with it. And although it's painful to practice this way, we still think that such aversion is 'good'. Fortunately, it doesn't take any special skills to correct course in the right direction, it's enough to stop going the wrong way.

FOUR PATHS TO SUCCESS

getting things done, four paths to success, iddhipāda

Doubt and criticism stop everything. The energy to move toward a goal depends on the faith that that goal makes sense, and the resolution to put effort into it. We don't have to know how it will work out to the end, but if we consider the situation, we are ready ask, 'What is the smallest possible step I can do right now?'

The Buddha described the mental tools for success in four categories called the Paths for Success (*iddhipāda*): enthusiasm, energetic effort, focused attention and investigation (Figure 4.1).* One might call these tools the 'Buddhist Getting Things Done' method.

changing plans, meeting obstacles, the best time to learn

You might have heard the saying, 'Plans are worthless, but planning is indispensable'.** The plan changes when we meet the actual circumstances. But when we are improvising the new route, we utilize the information we gathered while planning.

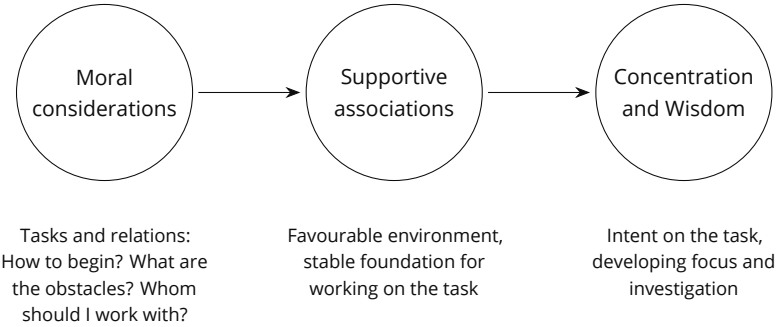
Investigating the circumstances, considering the worst possible outcome that is reasonable to expect, if we can at least avoid that, that's enough to resolve to start. Keep the momentum going, keep the sails in the wind.

In theory, to learn and practice sounds attractive, but what kind of situations can we expect to learn from? Looking back, I remember periods when everything was going well in life and things were under control. At such pleasant times, I could use and refine the old steps which had always worked before. When I was feeling terrible, sorry for myself and complaining, I didn't learn much from that. And when I followed a routine of trivial, comfortable but grey habits day after day, that wasn't particularly insightful either.

* Cf. Chapter 18.6.B. in Buddhadhamma (buddhadhamma.github.io), Development of Concentration in Line with the Paths to Success

** U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower used this phrase, which he credited to an unnamed soldier.

Figure 4.1: The Four Paths to Success (*iddhipāda*)



Four Paths to Success (*iddhipāda*)

Qualities of mind which develop concentration and lead toward accomplishing the goal

Aspiration, Enthusiasm (*chanda*)	A keen interest in the objective of such activity, a love for one's work and its goal. A desire to complete and manifest the goodness of the goal. Happiness, delight, joy, satisfaction when reaching the goal.
Energetic Effort (*viriya*)	Courage, effort, perseverance, not getting discouraged or intimated by obstacles and difficulties. The mind is unified and stable, intent upon the goal.
Focused Attention (*citta*)	The mind is absorbed in and focused on an object or an activity; it does not release the object of attention or become distracted. One may not be aware of one's surroundings and loses track of time.
Investigation (*vimamsā*)	Analysis and examination which composes the mind to keep track of the matter at hand. Asking questions about causes and formulating a plan of action. Reasoning and reflection; an examination of defects of one's actions; experimenting and searching for ways to improve oneself. Here, the faculty of wisdom guides concentration.

Quiet and peaceful times are a blessing. I always appreciate a stable routine which allows for long periods of concentrated work or dedicated practice. That said, obstacles and conflicts are guaranteed to arise.

We don't have to worry that meditation is going to solve our every problem and that we will have nothing left to do. Meditation is not problem-solving. It is a practice of awareness which overcomes inner obstacles and faces external problems as they arise. If we have something important to do, it helps to clear our head first. But merely sitting on a cushion as if we have transcended all problems, we are practising ignorance the present, not the awareness of it.

Voluntarily facing obstacles and addressing them skilfully is a golden chance to develop the mind beyond our preconceived limits. The confused chaos is rich in the potential to develop and learn in a practical way.

We are not seeking the feeling themselves, not trying to create special feelings by meditating, or seeking the ideal situation where everything will pleasantly work for us. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral feelings will not, in themselves, give us right understanding if we follow their influence and react mechanically. Awareness has to notice their impermanence and uncertainty. With this, we can see what is wholesome and what is unwholesome in the present situation.

boat moving on the river, me and mine

Is meditation practice easy or difficult? A useful image to think about is how a boat moves on a river. When the boat is packed and burdened with product-filled crates, it moves heavily and slowly. It is just barely holding itself above the water.

We want our boat to go fast, don't we? But at the same time, we are holding onto everything we packed it with. We have to lighten our boat, and let go of the heavy burden of the self. We create the burden of 'me' and 'mine'. We create the impression of 'I have been like this. I am like this. I should be like this.' 'That was mine. This is mine. This, I want to keep. That, I have to get'. This is the weight that is holding our boat down.

The sense of having enough creates the mental space for generosity. Contentment is an ongoing part of practice. It is not a fixed state attached to conditions. Wise action and learning flow like a stream from contentment: When I think, 'I will be ready to do it when I have …', discontent occupies my thoughts and keeps interrupting my focus on the current situation.

wholesome thoughts, peace

But when I think, 'I am not good at it, but I have enough to start', accepting my current limits gives me energy for action. Then I often end up doing more than what I thought.

Thinking has a bad reputation in meditation texts, but clear thoughts create a condition for developing right attitude. Proliferative, compulsive thinking is a painful experience, but wanting to stop all thinking also misses the target.

Notice how wholesome thoughts are followed by contentment and peace. Consciously recollecting one's moral actions establishes a sense of stability and self-respect. We can trust ourselves to let go of the superfluous because we feel we already have enough.

If we try to solve it in our head, the practice is going to get complicated fast. In meditation, awareness through the body is a reliable guide: Watching the feelings and mind states as they come and go, we shift our view from being preoccupied with ourselves. We can leave behind complicated questions because we no longer need the answers.

light boat, enjoyable learning

What enables us to keep learning and developing? The journey is most enjoyable when the horizon keeps expanding beyond our previous limits. We expand the horizon not by travelling far, but by seeing with new eyes. The desire to hold onto what we think we are creates our current limits.

The boat is light, when it is empty of me and mine. It can cover great distances without making drama and fuss. What happens, if we are sitting in a boat, and somebody runs into us with their boat? We shout at them, push them away with the oars, and complain about it for the rest of the day. All this might be justified, but we ruined our day with our own bad company. It's hard to see the wisdom in that. What happens if an empty boat floats into our boat? Where did the earlier anger and negative emotion come from?

We tend to manufacture stories about me and mine, whether based on real or imagined events. If we take them seriously, and give them reality, the stories start to control us, and we create problems which didn't exist before.

Sometimes we sit on a meditation cushion and start playing out inner arguments with puppets of the imagination. It's a serious business! We have to win! Methodically thinking through a problem is a powerful tool, but

sympathy and kindness toward ourselves is necessary for a constructive inner dialogue. Otherwise, when the self is talking with itself, it finds itself in bad company.

he who can laugh at himself

It's surprising how we can wind ourselves up about a situation which hasn't even happened yet. It helps to keep a pinch of humour in our side-pocket in case of emergency seriousness. Recollecting a saying of the Greek philosopher Epictetus, 'He who can laugh at himself never runs out of things to laugh at.'

simplicity of the senses, letting go

In the practice of meditation, we restore right view by returning to the simplicity of the senses. If stories arise, we observe them from the perspective of changing conditions. By investigating the senses, we take a more fundamental level as our basis for attention. Pleasant feeling is like this, as we are experiencing it. Unpleasant feeling is like this. Neutral feeling is like this. They have a beginning and an end, they are changing and empty.

In the practice, the value comes not in accumulating results in a hurry, but in leaving space for letting go and patience. There are times for action, but simple patience solves a surprising variety of difficulties. The sense of being hurt, the feelings of urgency and importance come from ourselves. Restraint gives us a safe perspective, guarding ourselves and others. Let us allow our boat to move on in silence.

Bones

physical pain during meditation

Even if we are sitting in good posture, sooner or later, something somewhere is going to hurt. Practising in a good posture minimizes unnecessary discomfort, but it can't eliminate it entirely. Pain and discomfort comes with the fact of having a body, but we are not meditating to torture ourselves, and we can take care to avoid injury.

Regarding pain in the body, we can either investigate it as a meditation object, pay attention to another area of the body where there is no pain, or change our posture.

If our habitual reaction to pain is a sense of anxiety, aversion and restlessness, then a period of investigation can be useful. Remember the intention that you wishing yourself well. Then investigate, observe the pain, how it shifts around in the body, how it arises and ceases in waves. 'Who is suffering? Is it changing? Where is the awareness which knows this?' This changes our perception from experiencing pain as an emergency situation which needs to be solved right now, to experiencing it as a signal which we can choose to put aside for a time.

The pain may not be a sign of injury, like, for instance, the discomfort comparable to what we feel sitting through a long bus ride. We might choose to keep our attention on a different part of the body. Or we can move our attention methodically around the body, noticing a spot where it is not painful, and meditating while staying with the sensations in that area.

An interesting exercise is to locate exactly where the edges of the painful area are. Is it a sharp or diffuse boundary? Does it stays fixed, or does it gradually shift around? This investigation familiarizes us with the arising and ceasing nature of the pain. It becomes less of a big deal. We don't have to react with aversion to it, there can be some free space for the unpleasant sensations to just be.

When you do decide to move, before you move, pause for a moment and establish a clear intention: 'I move out of compassion for the body. I change posture because I wish my body to be well and healthy.' Then shift your legs or change posture. This keeps the continuity of mindfulness intact as we are not then reacting out of aversion or restlessness.

contemplating the body, bones, perception of self

After a sitting session, you might change the posture to standing, and allow the joints and the muscles of the body to relax. Standing requires more attention to maintain balance, and the bones – the supporting structures of the body – are easier to feel.

The bones make up the core, the rigid parts of the body which determine its shape and what it can and cannot do. Without bones, our body would be a blob of meat. With bones, it has an inner structure which gives it the outward appearance we are familiar with. We look in the mirror and think, 'that's me'. How thoroughly did we examine the image before seeing ourselves in it? A brief glimpse of its outline, contour and colour will already trigger the perception of 'me'. We have a fairly static image of ourselves, in the present we remember ourselves as an image from several years ago. Since the rate of change is slow, we rely on fewer and fewer key features to recognize the image in the mirror.

Leaning closer, noticing more features, or seeing ourselves from an unusual angle, it might take minutes to decide who we are looking at. What determines this image? If the bones were slightly different, the body would be a different shape. Such a change would change not only our appearance, but also how we live.

standing meditation, standing posture

Stand in an upright but flexible manner and take some time to find your balance. Place the feet at shoulder width, with the knees relaxed and slightly bent, being engaged in holding the body. Don't let the knee joints lock up straight. This stresses them and will cause your posture to become rigid. Keep the feet parallel, with the toes pointing straight ahead. Rotate the hip toward the front along the horizontal axis, slightly pulling in the lower half. It is a motion like turning a bucket with the open top turning toward oneself.

Sway the body left and right a bit and feel the centre of weight. Develop a sense that you are holding the body upright, that you are preventing it from falling. It is better to balance the weight of the body toward the heels, rather than leaning on the balls of the feet.

Hold the shoulders wide enough to open the chest for easy breathing, but not so wide that they become tense. A comfortable place for the hands can be for example on the thighs, at about over the place where the pockets are on a pair of jeans.

Allow yourself some flexibility and make small adjustments to your posture as your muscles get used to the situation. Feel out your balance in standing and watch, take notice of the body as you hold it this way. Gravity is pulling it down. There is pressure on the ground. If that's

better, let your hands rest in front of the abdomen, one palm comfortably on the other.

The eyes may be open or closed. If you feel drowsy, you might prefer meditating with eyes open, but keep your gaze lowered, looking only a couple of meters in front of you. If you look straight ahead, your attention will be directed outwards, and various movements such as those seen out a window will be distracting.

If you close your eyes but it feels strained and painful, pay attention to where the eyes are focused when you close them. If they narrow in close, as if focusing on something close behind the eyelids, this causes the inner muscles of the eyes to strain and dry. This tension and dryness can even cause the eyes to water up with tears.

On traditional Buddha statues, the eyes are depicted as being slightly open. He is awake, not sleeping. Instead of shutting your eyelids tight, practise relaxing them. Let them stay lowered without any pressure. Though your eyelids are mostly shut, imagine looking at something far in distance. This lets the eye muscles relax. To allow some light in, you can try allowing a narrow slit to remain open. It can also help to massage the inner eye muscles a bit with the tips of the thumbs in a circular motion.

Breathe in, and watch how your posture changes with the movement of the breath. The diaphragm muscle pulls in the air and the abdomen moves forward to give way. The shoulder bones rise, the ribs in the chest open outwards, and your body's centre of gravity shifts slightly.

Is there something limiting the breathing? Take care to stand upright and don't let the shoulders hunch as this blocks the open breathing.

Take note of the balance of the head and find the position where the head sits on top of the spine of its own weight, not leaning forward or pulled backward. Instead of looking directly ahead, direct your gaze slightly down in front of you, so as to mitigate your attention becoming distracted by any comings and goings. Pulling in the chin, direct your gaze a couple of meters in front of you on the floor. Allow the crown of your head to rise up a bit, as if pushing the sky.

The position of the head controls the posture of the upper body to a great degree. Through years of sitting on chairs, we have developed the habit of pushing our heads forward which creates tension in the back muscles along the spine. Although we can't control these muscles consciously, we can experiment. What does it feel like to pull the head back a bit? You can feel out the balance where the muscles in the back relax.

In a balanced posture, the vertebrae of the spine sit one on top of another, like carefully positioned stones. With the spine aligned upright, gravity is enough to keep it settled in place. Such a posture gives us a pleasant feeling of light balance without forcing.

attitude to the body, analytical mind, goodwill

If our attitude is too analytical, it can conjure up grotesque and shocking impressions of the body, but a sense of goodwill towards ourselves can keep the meditation balanced and wholesome.

The intellect functions by building abstractions and separating out what it observes. When viewing the body, it might see the various parts as abstract and inanimate objects. Keep in mind that we are not practising body-

contemplation to create aversion or alienation to the body. We are practising meditation with clear comprehension in order to see things in their context, nothing is isolated in a vacuum. Our body-awareness includes rather than excludes and must come from a welcoming attitude of acceptance and goodwill.

This difference of attitude reminds me of a story about a dialogue between Plato and Diogenes. Plato was giving a lecture to his students at the Academy in Athens, where he defined men as 'featherless bipeds'. Diogenes happened to overhear this and, being fond of practical jokes, he brought a plucked chicken to Plato and held it up in front of him proclaiming, 'Behold! I've brought you a man.' He must have thought that this would show that a certain context was lacking in Plato's overly intellectual definition.

The group at the Academy added '… with broad flat nails' to the definition, in an attempt to satisfy their scholastic sensibilities, but probably still missing Diogenes' point.

experiencing the whole body

We watch the sensations in the body as we breath in and as we breath out. Turn attention inwards, mindful of the perception 'the body is like this'. The mind is not seeking, not going off around the world somewhere. It does not need anything, what is here is enough. Awareness sees the body, from the feet, to the legs, abdomen, chest, arms, shoulders, the neck and the head. The body is one whole, one changing perception, sensitive to the breathing.

Watching the body like this is like watching the rain. There is nothing to do, nothing to decide. The rain just goes on without us having to get involved.

clear comprehension, awareness of the body, defusing anger and desire

Unskilful thoughts are comparable to dust blowing in the wind: it blocks our vision, we can't see anything from them. The Buddha compared the effect of awareness on the mind to rain, as it settles the dust and clears the air. 'Quelling such [unskilful] thoughts and considerations, like rain on the dust, with a heart calmed of thought, you'll touch the state of peace right here.'*

Awareness of the mind stops unwholesome mind states from arising, develops wholesome mind states, this way purifying the heart. We may notice that our experience of the world is not fixed: we are not isolated outside observers, looking onto a world which is separate from us. We have a part in creating the world we experience, since we form its impressions through our mode of attention.

When clear comprehension is established and you notice the mind becoming more clear and stable, review what allowed this change? What did you do? What did you *not* do? You didn't have to fight or manipulate the sense experience or the thoughts and emotions, since they change through the change in the mode of attention.

Our mode of attention creates the frame of reference from which we experience the world of the senses, dependent on perception and memory. This is a process that conditions a certain attitude, like a function operating over time, which produces how we recognize and interpret ourselves in the present.

Shifting our mode of attention can serve to stop providing unwholesome mind states with more fuel. From

* Iti 87, Destroyers of Sight

the perspective of direct experience, and in accord with the way things are, such unwholesome states are then denied a basis or reference for their continuance.

In brief, we can say that awareness of the mind purifies the mind.

Staying with the awareness of body defuses both anger and desire. It changes the frame of our attention and such mind states then fall flat as though the carpet had been pulled out from under them. The busy, thinking mind is like a noisy show, or the news in last year's paper. The topic is no longer interesting, it has lost its urgency, it keeps going around the same circles. Put the thinking down, like a weary hiker their heavy backpack, and continue mindful awareness of the body.

Periodic distractions and daydreams can occur, but keep returning to the breath and the physical sensations of standing. If while standing, you begin story-telling or fantasizing until the bell rings, that's not practising insight meditation… it is practising waiting for the bus.

memory as self, narratives of self

Investigate your state of mind as an experience. The perception of your body and its feelings arise before we construct the perception of self from it. What do we remember about ourselves? If we forget about the narrative that someone told us yesterday, or if we recollect being with friends years ago, do we perceive ourselves differently?

This interaction between our memories, feelings and mind states keeps changing. Current perceptions keep changing, and recognizing awareness places trust in a place which knows this change. This allows us to see from a

wider frame, where there is no fear of the change. Creating the perception of our self is an ongoing process. We take an active part in it through actively recalling and re-creating memories. We narrate a story of ourselves from the memories of the past, and choose choose what to do now.

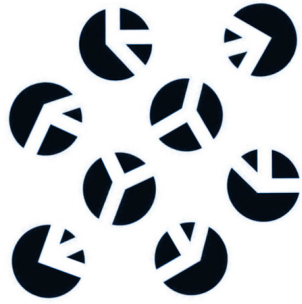
bones, parts of the body, sense of inadequacy, judgements of appearance

Observing the body and its parts, our minds stay with the changing perceptions before the creation of a self. This process disarms the self-judgement, fears and expectations that bog us down.

Notice the feeling of how the bones connect. There is this perception of an inner structure which supports the body from the inside: rigid pieces, connecting end to end, and stacked on top of each other. There are sensations in the legs: rigid perceptions denoting the long leg bones. There is pressure. The hip bone is resting on top of the legs and the torso moves joined above all this. The rib-cage expands and contracts with the breathing. The spine is holding the weight in a curve. The head is sitting on top of the spine. The skull bones are stretching the skin of the face.

Our body is made up of pieces. In some places, these pieces are hard and rigid. In others, they are soft and flexible. The combination of these is what gives our body its shape. When we look at a person, all we see is hair of the head, hear of the body, nails, teeth and skin. And we then construct a person from it all. We glance at a mirror for a fraction of a second, recognize the general outline or notice some particular feature, and think, 'That's me. How do I look?'

Figure 5.1: Experience and Illusion of Self



Do you see a cube on the diagram above and below?
Is there a cube drawn there?

Eyes
seeing forms

Mind
cognizing
mental objects

Self?

Ears
hearing
sounds

Body
touching
tactiles

Nose
smelling
scents

Tongue
tasting tastes

We experience a self, which has no substance beyond that experience. Above, conditioned expectations create filled-in shapes which we *experience*, but are not there. The Subjective Necker Cube is an example of illusory contours.

In some situations, we can notice the gradual steps of how this perception builds up as when we see someone walking in the fog. First, we recognize the shape of a 'person'. Then we detect 'male' or 'female'. Maybe it is someone we know? Some detail triggers the final recognition of our friend and their name. This entire process plays out in the realm of perception.

The habitual perception of the body – both of our own body and of other people's bodies – is that we see it as one unit, one thing. From that perspective develops an obsession that there is some ideal way that it should be. We imagine that the body has to be a certain shape, a certain size, and so on.

These are worldly judgements, perceptions which our society has drilled into us. Some cultures idealize a thin body, others a plump one, and these cultural ideals keep changing from one generation to the next. Advertisements and various messages from the media reinforce these expectations and we dutifully believe in them. When we look closer, we see that such perceptions are twisted and not in accord with reality.

We can be very concerned about what other people think about us, but how much are *we* concerned about the appearance of others? If I watch myself, I don't think much about how other people look. But I can feel self-conscious and imagine that *they* must be thinking about *me*. When, in fact, they think about me as much as I do of them – not much, if at all. They are occupied with getting on with their own life, just as I am with mine.

Besides the pressure of our self-judgment, we imagine

how others are judging us. And since we can't know and can't control what they think, we internally ruminate in the mind about it, which creates an illusion of such knowledge and control. When we play out these inner dialogues, we enjoy the illusion of control. But we miss out on the freedom of letting go of *the need* for that control.

body parts as not-self

We can notice the conditioned nature of this anxiety when various parts of the body become detached. We can be so concerned about our hair, for example… but only when it is on our head. When the hairdresser cuts it off, we are not anxious about the pile of hair on the floor. Similarly, when cutting our nails, what is that point when it is no longer 'me' and 'mine'?

When we contemplate the body in this way, we see it not as one unit, but as made up of pieces and parts which have their own nature and behave accordingly, each part not the least concerned with our opinions or those of others. Bones, skin, hair, teeth and nails: they are the way they are.

The body is a blessing. This meditation is not meant to develop aversion toward the body. Health is a blessing, it supports us in everything we do. The Buddha called health the greatest treasure.

stories as dreams, awareness of the body, grey and drifting states, gratitude

We observe the breath, the parts of the body, and our present experience. When we look, we find that they don't carry the stories of 'me' and 'mine' with them. Since it is we who are creating these stories, we can also stop creating them, we are not chained to following them. Phenomena arise through dependent conditions. When the conditions cease, the phenomena cease. This is all that happens.

Awareness of the body loosens the grip of our desires and leads us to recognize that we are fortunate to be here. We can always return to this attention: one in-breath and out-breath is enough to remember arising and ceasing. Doubts become like stories in an old newspaper. We get tired of untangling the threads of the past which are so difficult to follow. It is like interpreting someone else's dreams.

What is real, is always here in our present experience. What becomes important is not who or what we are in the story, but whether we can give our attention to where we are now.

Clear intention has an important role. When we don't set a clear intention, we are drifting. Perhaps we don't particularly mind being here and drifting like this, but the mind is grey with no life, almost trying to hide itself and be invisible. We end up being grey and invisible like that. Nothing wrong is happening, but there isn't any brightness and joy in being here.

We don't stop often enough to notice when we are happy and peaceful. When the mind is clear and calm, the natural feeling is a sense of gratitude for what is here, and for the blessings we have received in our life.

Gratitude is not created by will. In this practice we are not creating anything, we simply recognize what is here with clear intention. It is not a matter of strength or ability as those are bound to time and circumstance. But resolution and mindful attention are not bound to a given circumstance. The result is a right perspective in which we can see the right order of things and what to do with them – or to stop, give attention and breathe.

Awful

A CONSTRUCTED IMAGE

superficial impressions, bitterness, false expectations

– Hello, how are you feeling today?
– Awful.

This is not what a meditator is supposed to say, is it? They should respond positively, such as, 'I'm feeling great, it's such a lovely day!' Or at least 'I'm OK, and how are you?' We have an image of a 'meditator' in our heads who is supposed to behave and speak in certain ways, while not behaving and speaking in certain other ways. We might ask, 'Who has put that image in *my* head?'

The image of the 'good meditator' is a perception formed from superficial impressions which, without deeper examination, we have allowed ourselves to see as real. Imagine opening an article about meditation. (While continuing to read the current one…)

It starts with the smiling photo of a monk or a lay meditation teacher, and it continues by describing the positive effects of mindfulness. It might include stories and photos taken at a retreat. People are sitting on meditation cushions with serene faces while the light through the window is illuminating the Buddha statue. The article might contain interview excerpts about how participants had overcome their inner struggles. It ends with the encouraging words of a meditation teacher, or with a quote from the Buddha. THE END.

Even someone not terribly interested in meditation knows what this article looks like, we have seen dozens of them. There is no need to include a reference source, the chapters in this book could be examples as well.

This is not to suggest they are being deceitful. The authors write with good intentions. They are trying to encourage us to continue on the path of contemplation and to put effort into our practice. If we can't see a greater happiness beyond the frustrations, what would be the point? If there was only suffering and misery to expect, we don't need help in creating that.

happiness, get out of your own way, removing blocks from a river, vipassana-glamour

Buddhism is fundamentally optimistic, and one of its central theme is happiness. Our typical attitude is that we seek the things which give us happiness, or that want to create the circumstances necessary for our happiness. But it is not sure that we understand the right attitude, and we can become so entangled in seeking happiness, that we become more and more bitter, as it can seem that such happiness can never be realized. We assume the fault is in our circumstances or personal abilities, but in reality the problem is that we don't understand how things work, and this is why our attitude leads us in the wrong direction.

Our task is not to search for happiness, but to understand the cause which gives rise to suffering, and stop creating it. Through understanding this, happiness spontaneously appears in the mind.

Our way of thinking is like continuing to keep carving a statue until it is *just right*, but with which we are never satisfied. We think it's our fault, and we don't notice that the materials of the statue are just the way they are. The

clay, sand and stone will remain what they are. The groups of *khandhas* – form, feeling, perception, mental conditions, and consciousness – will remain as they are. What creates the struggle is when we expect them to be otherwise.

Effort is necessary, but a more useful metaphor for wise practice could be that of a choked up river: when boulders of stone are obstructing the flow of the water, creating turbulence. We tend to focus on the turbulences of our feelings, and while trying to stop the vortices, we create more of them. It may be the case that all it needed was to remove the boulder blocking the flow: let's not grasp the whole shebang as 'I am this'. Sometimes we just need to get out of our own way.

If you observe the water flow in a river channel, you'll notice vortices forming behind obstacles. Their back-and-forth motion might seem familiar (see Figure 6.1). When holding onto the perspective of 'I am' dominates the mind, we start flipping back-and-forth between opposites. We reason with ourselves what to do because 'I like A', or 'I don't like B', 'I should do X', 'I shouldn't do Y'.

Not satisfied with either, but holding onto an identity, the mind is stuck in a flip-flop between the extremes. One opposite invites the other as a reaction, the extreme positions being easier to reach, rather than a cool-headed look at the situation from an outside perspective.

The teachings do mention suffering frequently, but such instruction is given on the ground that freedom from that suffering is possible. The Buddha made it clear that the fruit of the path is genuine happiness, and if it was not possible to practise it, i.e. to abandon unwholesome

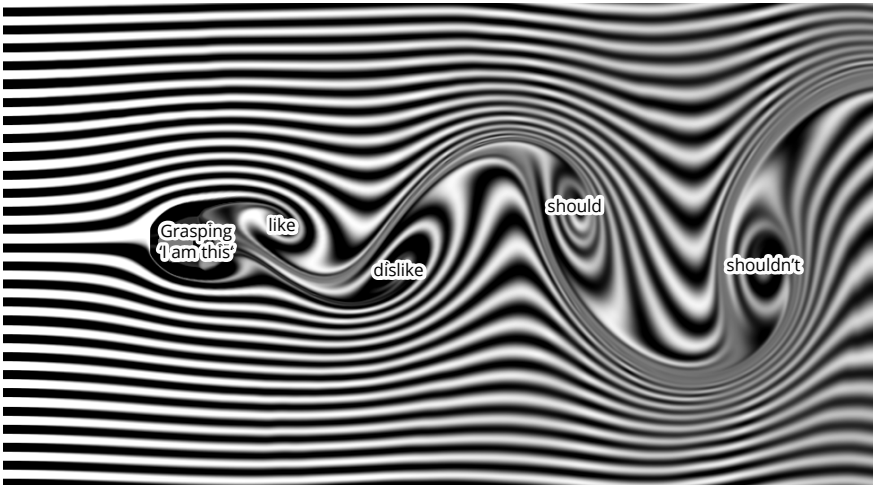
roots and develop the wholesome ones, he would not have taught it.*

Who is that meditator in our head? One thing is sure, the one in *my head* is always a *better meditator* than I am. When someone takes a good photo of us, we know how it is: it was a good moment when we looked orderly or even glamorous, but we know that in five minutes the opposite could be true. And although this is true not just for us, somehow we don't remember this about good photos taken of other people.

These are a sort of *vipassana*-glamour shots – it's a bit vain but we like looking at them. They make good illustrations in an article, but we should remember that the same people will look different in an ordinary moment.

*AN 2.19, Skillful

Figure 6.1: Grasping and Turbulence in the Mind



Turbulence in obstructed water flow. The formation of vortices is similar to how grasping 'I am' in the mind causes one to be stuck in a back-and-forth motion between opposite positions. Fluid simulation by Amanda Ghassaei (apps.amandaghassaei.com).

THREADS

suttas as literature

In the days of the Buddha, one form of literature was the *sutta*, which means a thread of discourse. *Suttas* may include prose and verse, and were intended to be memorized through recitation. The community of monks would compose a *sutta* after a significant event, such as a discussion or formal a teaching, to give the story a formal presentation in which they would memorize it. The Buddha certainly encouraged them to do so:

> Thus you should train yourselves: 'We will listen when discourses that are words of the Tathāgata—deep, deep in their meaning, transcendent, connected with emptiness—are being recited. We will lend ear, will set our hearts on knowing them, will regard these teachings as worth grasping & mastering.'
>
> *SN 20.7, The Peg*

Today, books, articles and blog posts fulfil a similar function, to distribute curated information. These modern media, when bringing their best form, hold up the canonical *suttas* as their example. The monks of the early years delivered their message to us through these threads, and their efforts have become part of our conversation with those we meet today, just as our written works will speak to those in the future who we will never meet.

social media, selection bias, Instagram Effect

In today's social media the clear understanding of the message is distorted by what is called 'the Instagram effect', which is a selection bias to show only our best and most positive side, and filter out the negative one, which is nonetheless just as real and necessary for complete understanding.

This influence is not negligible. Medical studies have already started discussing a related form of depression and obsessive behaviour called 'Snapchat Dysmorphia'.* In these cases a given person seeks cosmetic surgery to look more like the smiling photos they see in the application.

The automatic filters of the app edit every picture to be more attractive, and if we repeatedly see our bodies shown to us (by the application) as a nearly flawless image, *that* becomes our mental self-image, and the unfiltered image we see in the mirror seems wrong to us.

One might consider a similar Instagram Effect in published articles about meditation experiences. The author has a point to explain, and they select a mix of personal experiences, opinions, and supporting explanations from other authors.

The author may write truthfully and try to avoid selection bias, but subtle, unconscious forms of self-filtering keep operating. The world of the written text is always a constructed reality. Nonetheless, when it succeeds in its goal, in the well-chosen words we recognize our own experience.

*Is "Snapchat Dysmorphia" a Real Issue? (ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)

our mental images as role models

The meditator who lives in our head is like a character in a poem, or the hero in a myth. Our heroes are wiser and stronger than we are, so that when we are feeling lost and weak, they can give us faith and advice. They can have unshakeable peace, so that when we are feeling awful, we are able to endure and wait until the difficulty ends.

Such mental images are, however, just that, and shouldn't be mistaken for a real person. They are valuable sources for guiding ourselves, their narrative description helps us to figure out what to do by showing where we are in a bigger picture.

The role of a mental image is not to determine what we *should become*. When we relate to perceptions and ideals like that, we are going to feel conflicted and inadequate, because the real circumstances of our life are far more complex, rich with ambiguous, shifting boundaries, and are not like the simplified, static reality of a mental image. Mental images are tools for explanation. They are *ways of seeing* the world, and are examples of acting correctly in a given type of world.

ASSUMPTIONS

mind and the world, mode of attention, actions and beliefs

We may remember the verse in the Dhammapada which points out that the world of our experiences is not independent of us:

> Mind precedes all states of being: they are led by the mind, made by the mind.
>
> *Dhp 1*

Does that mean that we are creating imaginary problems for ourselves?

We may start investigating by asking, 'Can the subject experience suffering?' Living beings can suffer, but a cultural idea or self-made story cannot suffer, even while *we are*. It changes our attitude if the subject of our concern only exists as a story and not as a living being. Such insentient stories include the narratives we have around institutions, nations, money, fame, or other social fabrications.

Next, a quick moral safety test: 'Would a wise person praise or criticize doing this?'

Further on, bringing our view to the surface: 'What assumption creates this stress and pressure? What is the motivation for doing this? Without what, would this have no significance?'

We can reveal such unconscious motivations by looking at our present actions and choices. What we choose to do now expresses what we believe in, the assumptions we have accepted in the past.

'Why am I choosing to do this, here? Where does this action come from and where does it lead?'

The underlying factors for our actions may come, for example, from the habitual conditioning of our environment. We may have not expressed in thought why we do what we do, but have felt *the results being expressed on us*, whether good or bad.

Starting the investigation with a closer look at our actions and *then* asking about the thoughts motivating them is a productive method. In our inner chit-chat we tell all sorts of contradictory things to ourselves, but our actions give clear points of reference.

the best place to learn, reversing assumptions

The associated feeling might be awful, but if we treat it as sign to turn toward the mind and investigate it, our approach will stay practical and productive. 'If I am here anyway, what can I learn from this?'

We find access to our assumptions through uncovering our unconscious motivations. Once we can express an assumption clearly, we gain the freedom to reverse it, or drop it.

We may ask, 'Does it help in this situation, if I reverse my assumptions?' Perhaps looking at it in the opposite way is exactly what is we needed either for peace of mind, or for dropping the issue as if it never existed. Either way, we are not acting out of compulsion: we are free to either let it go or *choose* to follow it through.

AFTER THE STORM

happiness and accomplishments

Meditation guides say, 'return to the present moment', but it doesn't mean that you must like everything you find there. The point is that this is the only place where you can live. If you are happy, you are not happy in the future, but in the present. If you are suffering, you can't understand it in the future, only in the present. In some situations, no amount of brainy self-talk is going to make it better, it is best to call it the way it is, and wait out the storm like a stoic. Conflict is genuinely stressful, separation from what we love is sad, and being alive always ends with the tragedy of our own death.

We tend to anticipate success, and we expect our hard work to be justified in the future. Examine that moment of accomplishment, what do you experience? There may be some emotional elevation – surprise, joy, exhilaration, relief – then everything is back to the ordinary level. The destination turns out not to be the deliverance we thought it would be. If we were intensely focused to get there, we might not even remember anything from the journey, and wonder where did all the time go. We can be so intent on being productive, that we waste our chance to live.

Contemplating death holds up a truthful, if somewhat scary, mirror to our values. 'If I were to die tonight, would I be happy to remember living as I am living today?' This question can stir up more from the deep recesses of the psyche than we wish for. I remember a time when my response the word 'happy' was exclusively anger and self-aversion.

values, being busy, Hedonic Treadmill, burnout, contentment

The term 'Hedonic Treadmill' describes the adaptive process in which each new achievement becomes the new norm in our psyche, and we feel less and less emotional impact after succeeding at our goals. Like on a treadmill, no matter how hard one tries to increase one's happiness by pushing toward the next successful step, one still remains in the same place. We spend our life travelling on the journey, not hanging out in the destination. If we look closer, even the idea of any destination evaporates, like when you fly into a cloud. 'I thought I saw it right ahead, but now that I'm here, I can't see it.'

Despite this, we seem to continue thinking that being busy, productive and efficient, is somehow going to save us. When one project is finished, we can feel that we *need* another one because being busy is the only way of existence we know.

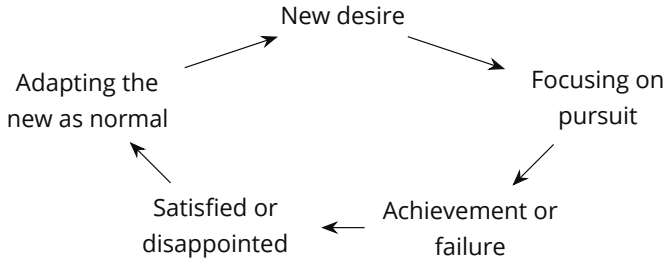
The wise men of old repeat their message about contentment, but it seems that we have to suffer the pain of burnout before we comprehend what the problem is.

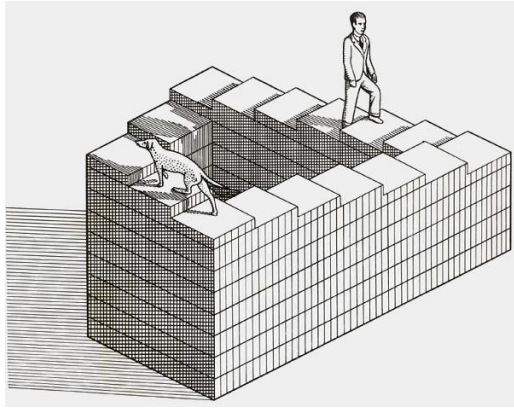
Bertrand Russell gives a diagnoses, 'One of the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one's work is terribly important.'*

Henry D. Thoreau writes in his cabin by Walden Pond, 'It is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is worse to have a Northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself.'**

*The Conquest of Happiness by Bertrand Russell
**Walden by Henry David Thoreau

Figure 6.2: Achievements and the Hedonic Tredmill





The Hedonic Treadmill is the tendency for new achievements to be adopted as a modified, *normal* baseline, and for our level of happiness to return to the same level as before. After one desire is satisfied, the conditioned craving seeks a new state.

The person on the Penrose Stairs thinks that they are getting further and higher. From our outside perspective, we see that they are merely returning to the same level as before.

Recall the definition of Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering: 'It is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.' (SN 56.11)

What if you practice *being free*, instead of practising *to become free*? The system of gradual training described by the Buddha – while encouraging us to make diligent effort in our practice – starts with blameless happiness in the present, born of contentment through moral- and sense-restraint.

> […] they practice restraint, protecting the faculty of mind, and achieving its restraint. When they have this noble sense restraint, they experience an unsullied bliss inside themselves.
>
> *MN 38, The Longer Discourse on the Ending of Craving*

self-aversion, self-criticism, labyrinth of mirrors

It is easy to over-correct being busy, and swing to the other extreme: 'I've had enough! I'm just going to quit everything!' This might seem "logical" but, being driven by aversion, we continue to suffer. For many of us, it is easy to be critical of ourselves, and we diligently practice it with conviction to prove ourselves wrong, as if self-aversion was a virtue.

'I am feeling awful! A *real* meditator would never feel like this. I must be doing something wrong.' A whole identity can be built around this, a ceaseless internal monologue which always responds with complaints and self-aversion. One can live like this for decades, and it becomes the baseline by which we recognize ourself. 'If I wasn't feeling angry, I wouldn't even know who I was.'

It is like being stuck in a labyrinth of mirrors: everywhere you look, you only see yourself. The key to escape is to find a crack in the mirrors, and recognize change: the

feelings of being driven, and the motivations of anxiety and anger which we thought were constant are, in reality, changing all the time – breaking up and reforming. This labyrinth has been made by the mind, and what it has created is empty of self. It cannot be what we truly are.

Doubtless, we can find a persuasive logic in our self-defeating ideations, and our reasoning for being critical can be completely reasonable! Psychologists say that the most difficult patients are the ones who intelligently defend and justify their own bad habits. We can be so clever that there is absolutely no way to be happy … and we can prove it! Can you recall ever playing the role of such a miserable philosopher?

But we do not necessarily experience immediate relief when our self-reflection reveals to us the emptiness of what we have been pursuing. Anger, despair* and sadness can be our first reaction, generating thoughts of self-aversion. We purify the mind with the mind: These mind states are not reliable, they shut down our intelligence, and who wants that? So we let go.

patient endurance, gratitude, no hurry

Patient endurance is an underappreciated virtue, but often, all we need is to remember to wait: the dramatic rain and thunder of turbulent mental states will run themselves out.

When the sense of gratitude appears, it is a sign like the rainbow after a storm. It accompanies wholesome mental

*The Buddha compares dealing with anger and despair to walking along a path close to a deep drop-off. (SN 22.84, With Tissa)

states, and we can intelligently see the situation from more than one angle. This is a good base from which we can build useful thoughts about what to do next. Sometimes, the best thing to do is to simplify and turn away from certain habits and values. Other times, our view has changed and we might wish to keep up what we have been doing, but leaving the big hurry behind. We continue for the sake of living it, not waiting for some kind of elevated mental state in the future.

> One should not revive the past
> Nor speculate on what's to come;
> The past is left behind,
> The future is unrealized.
>
> *MN 131, One Fine Night*

HUMOUR AND IRONY

opinions, changing perspectives, noticing what is pleasant

There are morose, dark moods which are like sand-traps of logic, made by ourselves. The more we think about them, the deeper we sink in them.

Humour and irony are funny because they show the situation from unexpected and odd angles. If the logical path straight ahead is blocked, why not try the sideways track where the fox goes? A joke wouldn't be funny if it was logical and reasonable. Humour and irony, directed toward ourselves, are good friends when it seems that we can't escape the suffering of our thoughts.

What makes the old and wise men *wise*? Medical studies* have investigated the various attitudes of senior citizens, and found that an inclination toward self-directed humour and irony (i.e. being able to laugh at oneself) was helpful to face the significant challenges of ageing and maintain mental balance and a positive outlook on life.

One of their key observations is that humour and irony develop our ability to see ourselves from multiple viewpoints. We can fill the role of the accurate historian and the jesting comedian at the same time. Hence we are able to see events from multiple narrative angles and not be caught in a single story. The frame of the narrative we see ourselves in remains open as we move toward a positive future. The limits of our being don't necessarily mean the end of the story, and we don't have to go far to find good laugh: in the absurd corners of life, there is always a joke to tell.

It can be rude to joke about somebody else's bad situation, but who is going to get upset over your humorous comments about yourself? If you feel awful, how about an awful joke? This trip is so bad that it's good, and the tickets are free. 'What am I? An animated skeleton in a skin-bag with clothes on, standing here with a fabulous hair-cut, and I can prove the logic of *my important* opinions.' What's not to laugh at?

We say that in meditation we observe our own mental habits, but sometimes we practise this with a critical

* Aging, irony, and wisdom, William Randall (researchgate.net)

bias: we observe the *bad mental habits*, while we don't notice the good ones. It is possible to become so good at ignoring pleasant mind states that one genuinely believes happiness only exists for other people. When something good happens and you feel happy, stop and notice it, 'Hey, this is nice.' This increases our capacity to recognize and experience such mental states in the future. Who will notice it if you don't?

EXPECTATIONS

symbol of Buddha statues, changing predictions, relinquishment

We might look at a Buddha statue and expect ourself to meditate in the same perfect posture without moving, like the Buddha. But in this case we have missed the message of the statue, which points to inner qualities rather than external signs.

A Buddha statue is not a depiction of the historical *Siddhattha Gotama* Buddha who lived in the 5th century BC. We don't have a statue of him made during his lifetime. We know from the *suttas* that he was normal height and good-looking, but instructed the monks to not focus on his physical appearance, bot on the Dhamma, the truths of the mind instead.

He taught them that even if a monk were grabbing hold of the corner of his robe, but if they didn't see the Dhamma, they would not see the Buddha.* The first Buddha statues were made four or five hundred years after his death by Greeks in the Gandhara region of Afghanistan. Buddha

*Iti 92, The Corner of the Cloak

statues represent the wisdom and serenity of the awakened mind, expressed in the human form.

They are beautiful to look at, but nobody is going to become a Buddha statue, just like you can't become the photo of the perfect meditator, or the hero in lyric poem. They do offer advice, but the advice can't orient us when taken rigidly. We should apply the advice by taking our inner experience and the present situation into account. This way we return to the awareness which awakens to the truth and overcomes obstacles. The practice of virtue, and the trust in the examples of skilful teachers is a strong foundation. We can wish ourselves well, while still admitting that we feel awful, when that's how it is.

Expectations are a prediction of the expected value of a result, they estimate the outcome of our situation. Meanwhile, every factor which goes into that prediction is changing. We have to allow the prediction to change, our expectations of our mental experience must keep changing according to where we are now. Having expectations is not a problem, but if we attach to a particular outcome which we believe to be 'the real one', this becomes a hindrance. It turns out that if we invest in future emotional states as the basis for our happiness, the result will be disappointment.

The *ānāpānasati* breathing technique taught by the Buddha has sixteen steps. The first is knowing whether the breath is long or short. But what is the last step? We might wonder, 'What could be that exalted mind state which we will reach?' Mindfulness meditation on the breathing, after contemplation of the body, feelings, and mental states, follows contemplating the natural truths, of which the last step is:

> One trains thus: 'I shall breathe in contemplating relinquishment'. One trains thus: 'I shall breathe out contemplating relinquishment'.
>
> *MN 118, Mindfulness of Breathing*

The practice of the Eightfold Noble Path is not about accumulating, but about transforming our values through insight into the experience of changing conditions. At the end we relinquish the conditions, like putting down a burden and not carrying it any further. This includes all that we take to be 'me and mine'. Anyway, how long can we really hold onto anything?

real practitioner, Impostor Syndrome

Reflection and cultivation opens up a wider field of view where opposites can exist in complex relationships. In the contrasting approach, we exalt the judgmental and comparing mind, and this limits our scope. Such a perspective wants to sort things into neat, mutually exclusive abstract categories, which leads to mistrust and harm. We start losing faith, not believing ourselves to be 'real' practitioners, and others don't seem to be credible ones either. The result is that we can't learn from ourselves, and we can't accept anyone to teach us either. This doubt is blinding and paralysing, it feels like we can't do anything. The problem is that our expectations are too narrowly focused.

It's not that there are no problems and difficulties. Explaining to ourselves that 'pain is not painful' is not a meditation technique taught by the Buddha. But we shouldn't assume that we should be like mythological ideals. Meditation is not a button to control mental states.

It is cultivating awareness, so that mental states don't control us.

CALIBRATING EMOTIONS

learning emotions, variation is the norm, disappointment, saññā and saṅkhāra

When we talk about emotions to each other, we often explain their mechanism roughly as a 'neural circuit', or a region in the brain which gets activated in a certain situation. According to this story, some brain areas are wired from birth to produce given emotions, and they make us feel fear, love, anger or disgust.

But then how do we explain it when a person without an *amygdala* still experiences fear? The *amygdala* is typically seen responsible for that emotion.

Or how about more refined categories?

The Japanese *'mono no aware'* means a sadness over transience and the beauty found in that, are the Japanese born with such a neural circuit? By the description, you might recognize the feeling, if you have seen Japanese movies it might even be familiar, and now, fitting a verbal expression on it, it gets easier and easier to feel it.

Other cultures find the western emotions strange, for example the Utka Eskimos, who have no direct equivalent of the concept of 'anger.' Or the Tahitians, who have no concept of 'sadness.'

Medical research informs us that no particular emotion has a built-in 'brain-circuit' from birth.* It is not

*How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain by Lisa Feldman Barrett, Theory of Constructed Emotion

the given emotion that is fundamental, but our ability to recognize patterns of loss and reward, to *learn emotion concepts* from other people, and to recognize them in a new situation in the future.

In any given situation, the brain recognizes if an earlier experience *in a similar context like this* was rewarding or not. This becomes easier over time if we have learnt to associate an emotion concept with it, becoming a spontaneously automatic feeling.

The instances of an emotion category are variable: 'fear of a tiger' is different from 'fear of an exam', which are learned and adaptive predictions. They fit only to some extent, like a person may fit a stereotype, but no person is a 100% example of every feature of the stereotype.

Our brain evaluates the present based on the past, and according to whether good or bad can be expected, there is a response we feel throughout the body, and we construct an instance an emotion from it based on our concepts.

emotions are categories, not distinct mental object, learning emotions, what is wrong with me

In the classical model of emotion – which we are accustomed to in everyday discussion – we treat emotions as distinct mental objects. The idea is that an emotion has clear attributes that any two mentally healthy people should agree on.

However, while they were studying the brain in action, it became apparent to the scientists that this cannot be the case. As they conducted more and more studies, the evidence continued to contradict this view.

When people undertook physical and psychological tests about the emotions they experienced, the results had great variation between individuals. There were no

universally distinct, clear markers, or 'fingerprints' to identify any given emotion. Rather, the *variation was the norm* in both people's emotional experiences, the meaning and function of those emotions, and their corresponding physical reactions.

The scientists found that our body and brain *learns* emotion categories through a process of conditioning perceptions. From our culture, the other people we live with (socially conditioned emotions); from biological needs (bodily conditioned ~); or from our personal history, such as long-time habits, significant events and our memories.

This also relates to how one person might not understand, or not even recognize, the emotions of another. For example think of the culture shock when visiting a distant country: an emotion such as 'love' has a variety of expressions, contexts and underlying assumptions which were not part of our earlier emotion category of 'love'. It can take a while to pick up the new signs and meanings until we can feel the subtle differences, and we can reliably recognize the signs in others.

Ask yourself, how do you know that you are feeling a particular emotion such as *metta* (loving-kindness) or *sukha* (happiness)? The model we use for our understanding of emotions influences what we expect to happen in our meditation practice. If we think of emotions as distinct things, as though they were external objects which we wish to reproduce, or have access to, then we can easily feel 'this is not it, I don't know what's wrong with me'.

Since *variation is the norm*, our experience will probably differ from other people's. Individual meditation

experiences are as varied as the individuals. A given instance of an emotion can be expected to vary from the generalized idea. It is important to rely on knowing *our* mind states and feelings, instead of trying to reproduce external descriptions.

Our freedom extends to learning and constructing emotions we never heard of before. We rely on mindfulness to perceive our experience, we self-train the concept, and establish the conditions for the emotion to arise.

Using the terms of the Five Khandhas, we would say that perceptions (*saññā*) and mental conditioning (*saṅkhāra*) influence each other and establish patterns of experiences, which we learn to identify as a present instance of a broader, abstract emotion category.

We start with reading the external description and we turn it into an inner experience through reflection and daily actions. Knowing our experience is the reference point. Over time, the new experiences become familiar to us and they arise without effort.

emotions as predictions, culture shock, adjusting expectations

The brain is constantly receiving signals from the nervous system, and based on what it has learned, it tries to predict whether the present situation is going to mean energy input or energy expense for the body.

The brain responds by preparing your body, such as increasing or decreasing the heart rate, starting or stopping the production of certain hormones. We experience this bodily reaction, and if earlier we learnt an emotion category which suits this, we feel an instance of that emotion: fear of danger, excitement in anticipation of immediate reward, or euphoric happiness.

This explains culture shock: if you have grown up in a different culture, you've learnt different emotion categories, and when travelling to a distant country, the emotional world of the people living there can be unfamiliar to you.

We tend to believe that our experience is like the view when we look out a window. One 'looks onto their experience', and sees what is going on.

It turns out that the picture is rather more incomplete than we think, when we take into consideration how the senses and the nervous system work. The brain doesn't have much information to work with, so it has to guess at what is happening from simple signals, hints about what the rich world outside of itself might be like.

The brain can't see much: it's sitting in the skull, which is, in effect, just a dark box. Bodily fluids, chemicals and nerve signals carry messages into this box. The messages come from other systems in the body, which are themselves noisy and sometimes conflict with each other. From this clutter, the brain has to generate a perception of the place where we are, guess what is happening to us, predict what is likely to happen in the next minute or so, and produce a response which is hopefully going to help us survive, or even lead to happiness. It has to do all this, from inside a dark box, based on a few noisy and limited signals.

What am I then? An animated skeleton, and my head is a dark box? Well, that does explain a lot of confusion. Is it a wonder that my predictions are a bit off, and need constant adjusting? What I experience as reality is ongoing guesswork, changing by the second.

'Happiness equals reality minus expectations' – a memorable phrase by Tom Magliozzi. These days, our expectations are so high. We receive updates from social media apps, we read web articles, and each time they influence our view of how we are, and how the world is around us. They show us perfect, determined, or outrageous images of other people. Since we don't meet these people face-to-face, we don't see the real background of their lives, and this exaggerates our expectations. It trains the brain again and again to expect these artificial presentations, like an expectation machine on overdrive. We don't even notice the distorted self-conditioning, but we are disappointed and exhausted, which leads to ceaseless dissatisfaction.

simplicity, impermanence, self-reflection, values

We have the ability to calibrate the 'expectation machine' through the balancing effect of conscious reflection and reasoning. 'What is the most important today? What do I need for this one day?' When you simplify the answer down to the essentials, it's not that much. Food, clothes, shelter, medicine, supportive companions and perhaps something to do toward a worthwhile goal.

The average day is probably more messy, and doesn't hold to this abstract, pure simplicity, but this exercise is only for recognizing the baseline. If simple is enough, then it won't be a problem to be able to do more, or have access to more, while contentment remains our baseline. Ambition is not the problem, but hyping up our expectations blocks its application.

Expectations are necessary to follow a given direction in the world, but not understanding them, they become obstructions in the heart. Expectations and emotions are

of the nature to arise, twist, flip-flop and then turn around. Let them pass on by, like leaves in the water next to a boat. Bad ones are not that bad and good ones are not that sure. Knowing their changing nature, we don't take them so seriously and don't get stuck on them, as a boat shouldn't get stuck on some leaves.

> Whether it be pleasant or painful
> Along with the neutral,
> Either internal or external,
> Whatever feeling there is:
> Knowing them, 'This is suffering,
> deceitful and disintegrating,'
> Coming in contact again and again,
> seeing their fall,
> One loses one's passion for them.

SN 36.2, Pleasure

HAPPINESS AS FLOURISHING

meanings of happiness, results, day-by-day practice, death, contentment

Our modern Western culture often presents happiness as a particular feeling, or as a certain circumstance in life which we are supposed to arrive at. We pass on our culture through discussion with one another. Our way of talking about happiness tends to treat it as an outcome, as an event in the future, or as a certain state of being. This seems to be a recently developed trend, and not necessarily a helpful one.

Traditionally, we view the ancient Greeks as one of the most influential societies in the formation of our Western values. Aristotle (384-322 BC) is one of these influential thinkers, and today we are still reading and referencing his writings which survived the ages. In these texts, he investigates the question of happiness in great detail.* He was concerned with what happiness was, and with how to live a happy life, but, unlike us moderns, he did not see it as a particular result or circumstance.

The Greek word he used for happiness is *eudaimonia*, and can be translated as 'human flourishing, prosperity.' He saw it as an active process which we practice day by day, rather than an eventual outcome in the future. He describes the practice of happiness as being based on moral virtue and a truthful view of one's life from birth, growing up, old age, and including the tragedy of one's own death.

This direct view of virtue and mortality puts things in order: it gives us a wide perspective in which happiness is founded in wholesome mental qualities, and we look beyond ourselves to give lasting meaning to it.

*Aristotle's Ethics (plato.stanford.edu)

Training our expectations in this way, the practice of happiness is a complete whole every day. We learn to be with the struggle when that's how it is, applying our best abilities in virtuous ways, and at the end of each day, we can look back with contentment.

If the field of 'happiness research' in psychology, Daniel Kahneman and his team have conducted interviews asking people to recall the episodes of the previous day and to later answer questions about them.* The evaluation confirmed that attention and recurring thoughts are the dominant factors in whether one feels happy or depressed. While the volunteers were going through a variety of everyday situations, how they felt was determined not by where they were and what they were doing, but by what they were thinking about at the time.

deathbed regrets, life as a unit of time, hierarchy of needs, self-actualization, self-transcendence

But it surprised them to find that when people spoke about what kind of day they had, they didn't talk about happiness as a good feeling, but rather they reflected on social experiences, friends and relatives, who they met and what they did together, and on whether they felt satisfied with their life or not.

All this makes sense when we examine our experience: the perspective, the frame through which we see the world orients us, while the content of the frame continues to change. The hungry person sees the world in terms of food, and where to get it. A person in an ambitious mood focuses on 'what I can do' and 'how good I am'. A person considering the limited time of his personal existence, tends to turn toward values which are self-transcendent. Rather than focusing on experiences created by the self,

*Thinking, Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman, Day Reconstruction Method

one turns to timeless qualities apparent here and now.

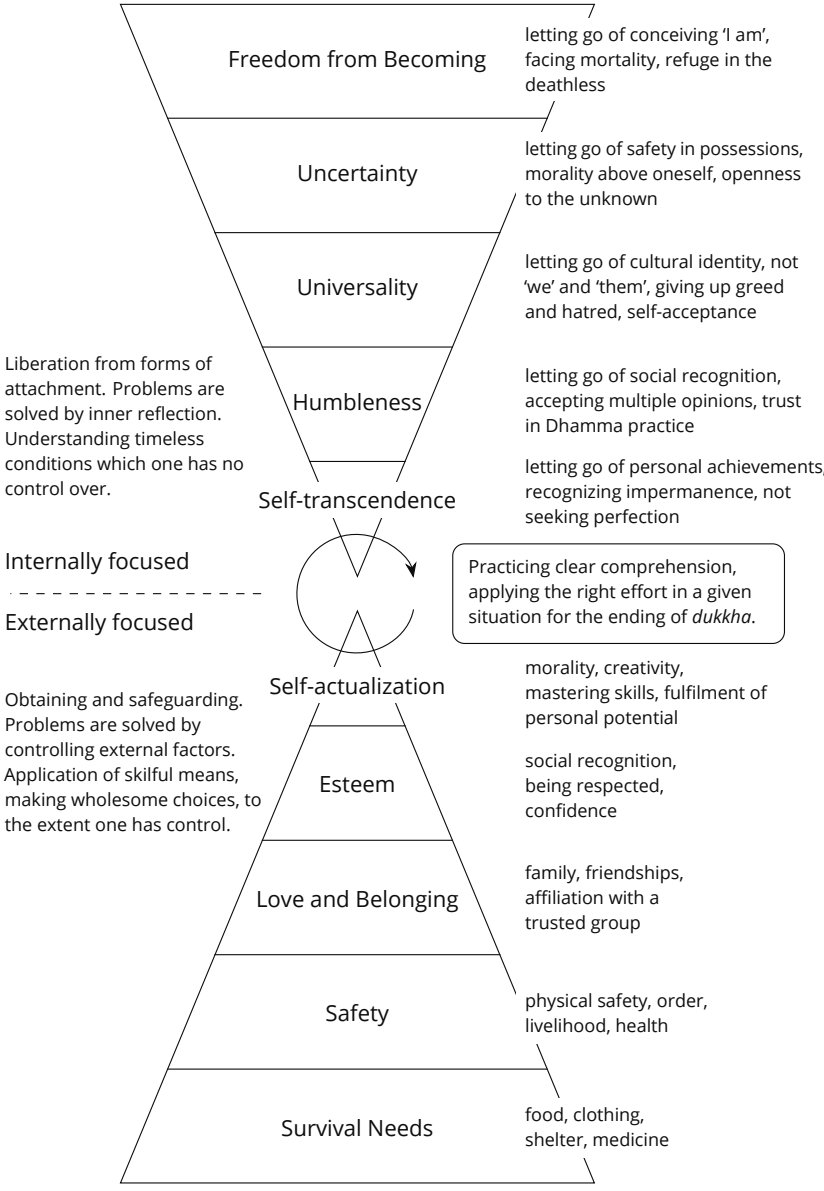
It was a discovery for me when I was listening to an interview,* and heard the psychologists discuss a new addition to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This is usually pictured as a pyramid starting with the need for food and water at the bottom, and ending with self-actualization elevated to the pinnacle. This seemed to be a rather ego-centric way of thinking about happiness.

The psychologists recently re-discovered Maslow's late writings,** and found that toward the end of his life, he felt conflicted about his system of the hierarchy of values: he was going to die, fundamental parts of his needs (e.g. survival) were lacking, hence he should be miserable, but instead, he felt relief and states happiness which he called 'peak experiences':

> Feelings of limitless horizons opening up to the vision, the feeling of being simultaneously more powerful and also more helpless than one ever was before, the feeling of great ecstasy and wonder and awe, the loss of placing in time and space with, finally, the conviction that something extremely important and valuable had happened, so that the subject is to some extent transformed and strengthened even in his daily life by such experiences.

*A Good Life: A Conversation with Scott Barry Kaufman
**Maslow's forgotten pinnacle: Self-transcendence (bigthink.com)

Figure 6.3: Hierarchy of Needs, Self-Transcendental Values



Maslow appended another level to his hierarchy of needs above self-actualization: *self-transcendence*. Examples include: not holding onto perfection, not fixating on one's opinions, giving up the need for certainty, giving up the attachment to one's past and letting go of the fear of death.

'Self-transcendence' sounds like something for a Buddha, but since we are suffering from our attachments to one thing or another, it turns out to be a basic *need* for all of us.

Holding onto what we think we are creates the very limits which we struggle with. We want to expand our horizon but we are held back by grasping an identity. When that identity turns out to be an empty void, we urgently need help. Think of the day-to-day struggles: being conflicted over opinions, stressed out about our abilities, anxious due to unexpected changes, lamenting past tragedies. A self-transcendent perspective is necessary to get over ourself.

Still, we do keep the score on how things are going for us, don't we? Wholesome conditions are our supports. This is the time and place where we live, not any other: *memento vivere*, remember to live. We know if our efforts are aligned with our core values or not, even though we can get distracted with things we didn't intend to spend so much time on.

I remember how it shook me up when I read in a description by a nurse,* that some of the most common

*Regrets of the Dying (bronnieware.com)

deathbed regrets included working too hard and losing touch with old friends. Life is a unit of time with a beginning and an end, and we should treat it as such.

memento mori, memento vivere, amor fati, saṃvega, pasāda

If tuning the mind to a comfortable numbness is 'tranquillizing ourselves with the trivial',* then recollecting death (*memento mori*) is a dose of anti-tranquillizer. Since the time is limited, we recollect the urgency to live (*memento vivere*) and do what must be done before it's too late. This motivates us to find the courage to be true to ourselves and turn toward the situation we are living in (*amor fati*), not waiting for some place and time we imagine in the future. In the Pali language of the Buddhist *suttas*, *saṃvega* refers to the sense of spiritual urgency, while *pasāda* expresses the serenity of having confidence in the Path and its practice.

Reading about deathbed regrets was a timely reminder for me to think about the urgency I felt about completing projects (which come and go by the month), and not losing the opportunity of spending quality time with long-time companions.

Reflecting on life as a single unit of time includes being born, growing up, growing old and dying. Remembering our mortality this way puts our values back in line with the facts of nature. We can give ourselves some time to dwell where we are, and appreciate it before it's over. We seem to understand the fleeting nature of good and bad feelings when we compare them to the importance of our golden relationships.

* A phrase used by Søren Kierkegaard in The Sickness Unto Death

Remember that we wish ourself well-being and happiness, and that we wish our family and friends happiness in their life. Consciously recollecting moral virtues builds mental resilience and self-respect. We can acknowledge ourselves: 'That was a good thing to do. I've done that well.' Or, we see it in others, such as in teachers, role models, and friends.

It develops gladness and appreciation of what is good in other people as we share in their successes. There is a wellspring of happiness in cultivating the face-to-face companionship of friends whom with we mutually feel glad at our successes in life. We can use humour to ease up a bad mood, and complete the next step forward.

The present is change itself. We bring that experience into awareness and contemplate the body, feelings, mind states and natural truths following the refrain in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*:

> … One dwells contemplating its nature of arising, or one dwells contemplating its nature of ceasing, or one dwells contemplating its nature of both arising and ceasing. … And one dwells independent, not clinging to anything in the world.
>
> *MN 10, Mindfulness Meditation*

Why

DOUBT AND FAITH

compulsive thoughts, orientation of views, unexpected changes

Sometimes we are interested in meditation in order to deal with a disturbing or painful experience. We know something is wrong and we can't shake it off. Or it could be a sense of feeling lost, where nothing makes sense: such feelings keep returning, they don't let themselves be ignored. Instead of answers, only the questions keep going round and round: 'Why does it have to be like this? What should I do, and why? What's the point?'

Even in such confusion, merely acknowledging the state of our inner chaos to ourselves already starts to provide some order and orientation.

It is like driving on a road cluttered with trash. Slowing down to look around is already much better than being blind to the dangerous clutter. Our head is full of thoughts but only a few of them indicate reliable directions, so we better examine them. Previously, we held a view that things in our world were one way, but they have changed in a way we didn't expect. It is not their fault, it is not our fault, but the unexpected change is confusing, and we have to adjust our view.

Impermanence pulls the carpet out from under our feet, but at the same time transforms our values, the qualities which we seek out as valuable in our experiences.

If we don't understand the change, it causes confusion, followed by doubt. Even though we might know what we *should be doing*, we get stuck in the sense of doubt and meaninglessness and we can't even begin.

meaning, investigating what I believe, faith as fuel

Why do you get up in the morning to do anything? Why does it matter at all? If I keep asking 'why' and dig into the layers of my constructed self like this, the first layer reveals a matter of habit, 'because this is what I did yesterday'. Under that, the answers are formed out of stories I tell myself about myself and the world I live in. Under that, there is some degree of reasoning, philosophy and abstract ideas. Under that, I am desperately trying to hold onto something solid, and I start defending my ideas with personal memories and experiences ('because when I was like this and this …'), or I refer to famous names ('because this and that teacher said …').

Under that, I have to give up and confess that it is a matter of faith and personal conviction. What I do is simply what I decide there and then. At the end, I stand there and have to admit that I don't *know*, but I *believe* that doing such-and-such makes sense.

Faith is not a fixed quality in the mind. We have the capacity to choose credible statements which we perceive will guide us toward a greater understanding and happiness. We can test any given belief by applying it in practice and by observing the results, and we can then support or abandon that belief accordingly.

I may review, investigate and update *what I believe* about what makes sense to me, but until my experience verifies it, my reasoning has to be supported by faith.

Otherwise, I will not make an effort in any direction, and my life will be governed by blind habits and external pressures.

Faith is the fuel for the virtues of resolve and energy. Later on, faith will be reinforced by experiencing the results of practice, but without fuel, our car doesn't even start.

belief as a cause of action, trust in the teacher

A belief creates a cause for an action. Without that belief, I don't take that action. In the Buddhist perspective, there are two fundamental beliefs:

1. A phenomena occurs when the sufficient causes for it are present; and it either does not occur, or it ceases, when the sufficient causes are absent.*

2. The Buddha completely understood the truth about the way things are, and thus freed himself from greed, hatred and delusion. Hence he is an excellent teacher of the way of practice.

The Buddha gave us the instruction that each person should question, ponder, and investigate the way things really are to understand it for themselves. Nonetheless, how are we going to start? Without trust in the teacher, we are lost in the tangle of our personal opinions and it is unlikely that we are going to listen and learn anything new. The tradition reminds us of this relation to faith when, before giving a Dhamma talk, we start by chanting *namo tassa* three times.

*SN 12.61, Uninstructed

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa

Homage to the Blessed, Noble, and Perfectly Enlightened One.

doubt, wandering in a desert, grasping creates limits

The Buddha compared doubt to being lost in a desert, wandering around without water.* Everything else is secondary: we can only think about how to find water and escape the desert.

Or, we fantasize about how to comfortably numb the mind and not think about anything at all, 'tranquillizing oneself with the trivial'** to continue everything as normal. In doubt, it is not clear how we will escape this situation, but we can start by acknowledging the aspiration to be well and to live a happy life.

It is our natural human ability to overcome confusion and develop long-term happiness in our lives. A long-term view has to include changes to our situation, loss and tragedy. Stable happiness has to be founded on a perspective which integrates impermanence.

In the *suttas*, doubt appears both in the list of Five Hindrances, and in the first three of the Ten Fetters, which are the ones that obscure understanding the Four Noble Truths. When doubt gets personal, there is no doubt that it leads to suffering. Figures 7.1 and 7.2 illustrate how we get into this mess, and how we can get out of it.

As a hindrance, doubt stops Right Effort, and stops developing the mind. As a fetter, it compels us to keep

* DN 2, The Fruits of the Ascetic Life
** Søren Kierkegaard, 'The Sickness Unto Death'

looking for fixed certainties, and thus ties us even tighter to our ideas about who we are.

We like the suggestion to develop our mind, but initially, we think this means making sure who and what we are, getting more of what we need, or changing ourselves to become something different.

'Who am I? What am I? What should I do? Is this the right thing? Or is it something else?' This way of thinking is a trap, it goes round and round with no way out. All these concerns are tied up with holding onto some kind of identity which will again invite doubt. Until we realize what is happening, we are caught in the cycle.

Even when we become successful, at the end of that becoming, it is going to change according to its nature, and we find that our new identity is also hollow, empty of real value, just as our previous idea of ourself.

Grasping at and holding onto what we think we are, being afraid to let go: this is the obstruction. This creates the very limit we are frustratedly running up against. Understanding freedom through letting go doesn't come to us easily.

Figure 7.1: Leading to Suffering

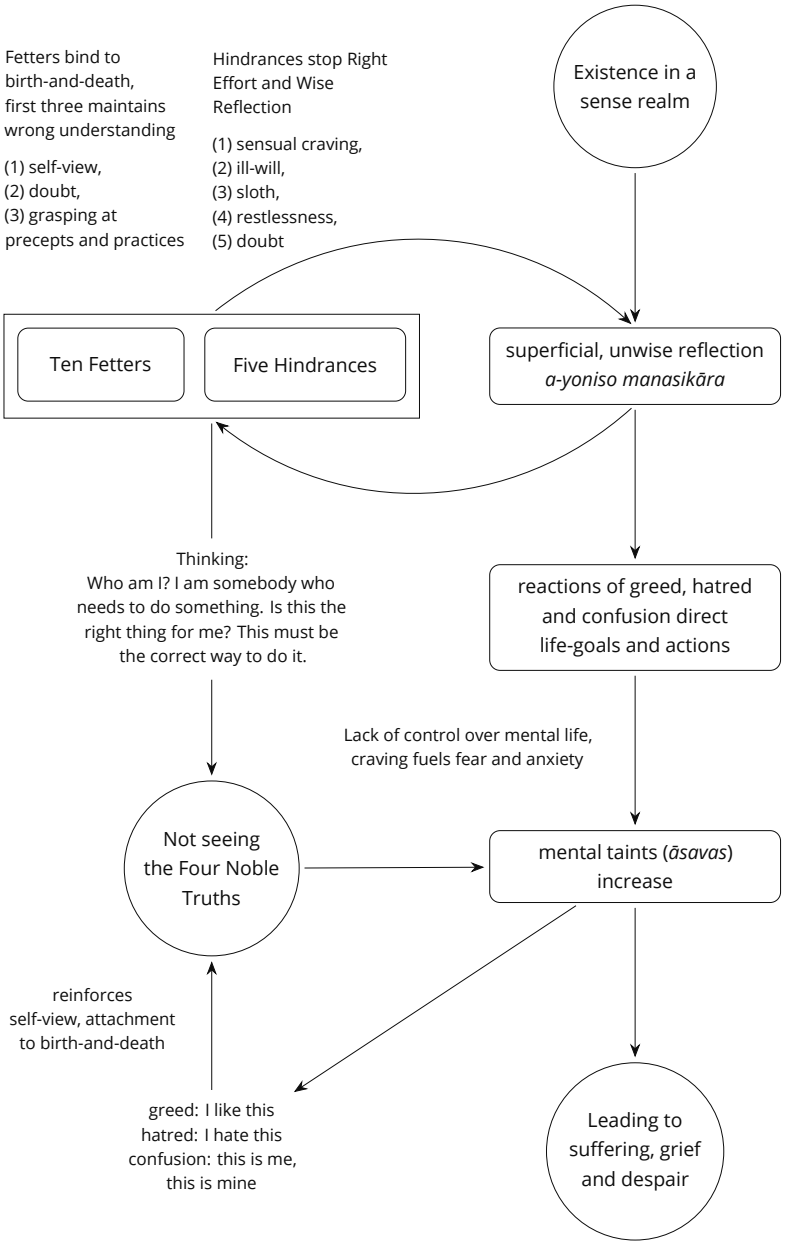
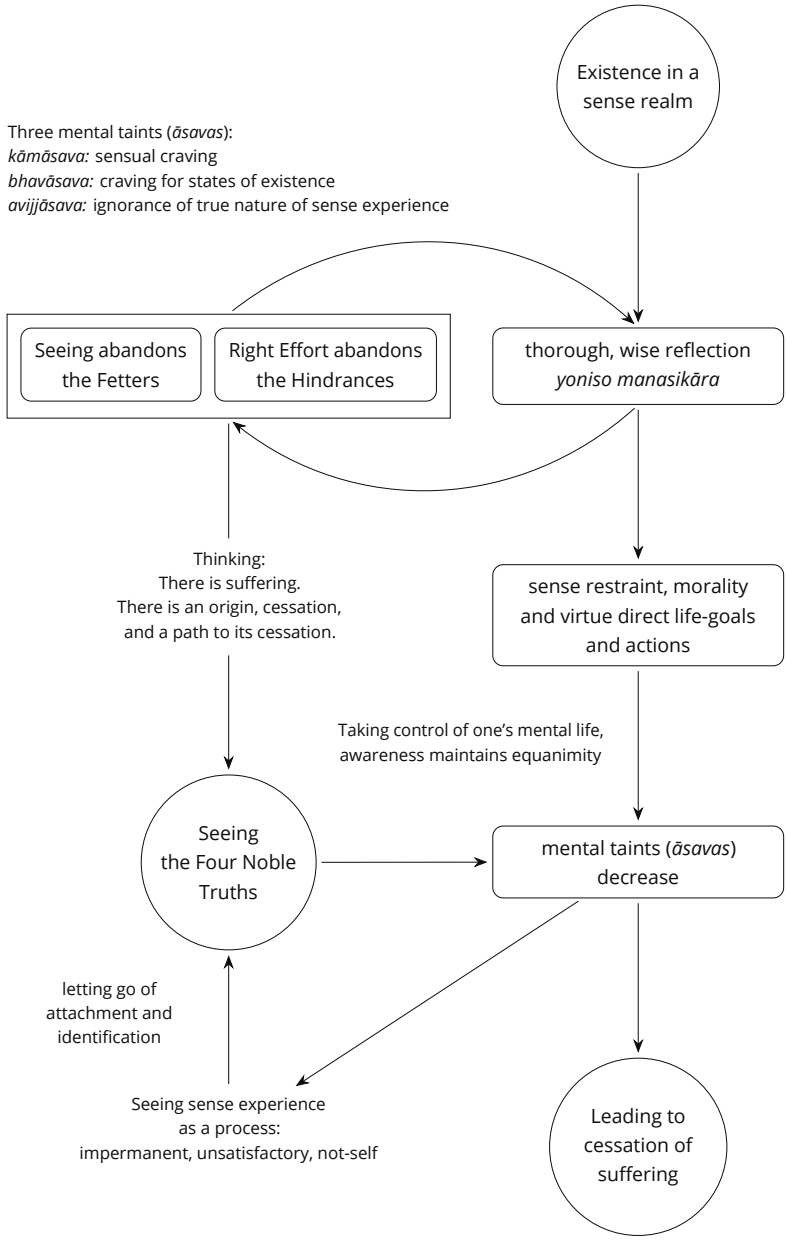


Figure 7.2: Leading to Cessation



RIGHT VIEW

returning to the beginning, observing thoughts

Let's return to the breath and continue the meditation practice. At the beginning of a session, start with the basics, simple steps which guide the attention back to the familiar frame: the in- and out breath, the body and its feelings. Observe what you are experiencing as a process which is going through continuos change from one feeling into another.

Every meditation session is a new beginning, we can't save the results of the previous session and load in the knowledge. If we start thinking we already know, say, if we have been practising this for years, this results in a closed attitude which blocks even our earlier understanding. Our experience from the past is only relevant when we apply it to the present. The changing present keeps understanding fresh and new.

'This thought, this feeling had a beginning, it is changing now, it will cease and end. Can I wait and notice that cessation?' Contemplating direct experience this way, the mind gives up its desire and fear regarding particular states, and understands them as part of natural processes. We are not reasoning to ourselves about what we think about the mind, rather, as if taking a step back and watching it, we mindfully experience the way it is.

This contemplation restores Right View, as if someone took an upside down flower vase standing on its top, and put it upright again. When we look, we understand which part of the vase is the top and which the bottom. We crave and want to hold onto experiences that are always going

to change, doesn't that sound stressful? Fortunately the mistake is avoidable.

freedom around limitations, essentials, gratitude, flooded with good advice

Right View finds space and freedom around the limitations and pressures of life. At first, we might not see much open space, but contemplating the essentials, we might notice that we don't need everything we can think of. We can ask, 'Do I have what I need for this single day?'

We can take stock of what we are using in our immediate environment – clothing, food, shelter, medicine. Sometimes, others give them to us or allow us to use them. At other times, we give them to others. 'Do I know how much is enough for today?' A sense of calmness returns when I recollect them again, even though I might know these fact already.

Recollecting the simple things, that we have what we need to live this day well, our attitude expresses itself in feelings of contentment and gratitude for life. You don't have to ask for them and you can't create them by will. We have to make space for them in our view, then they arise on their own.

What's the great hurry for? A simple exercise is to stop and do nothing for two minutes, not looking for entertainment and distraction. You can watch the breath, but this is optional. Not rejecting boredom as a mental state increases our focus and preserves energy.

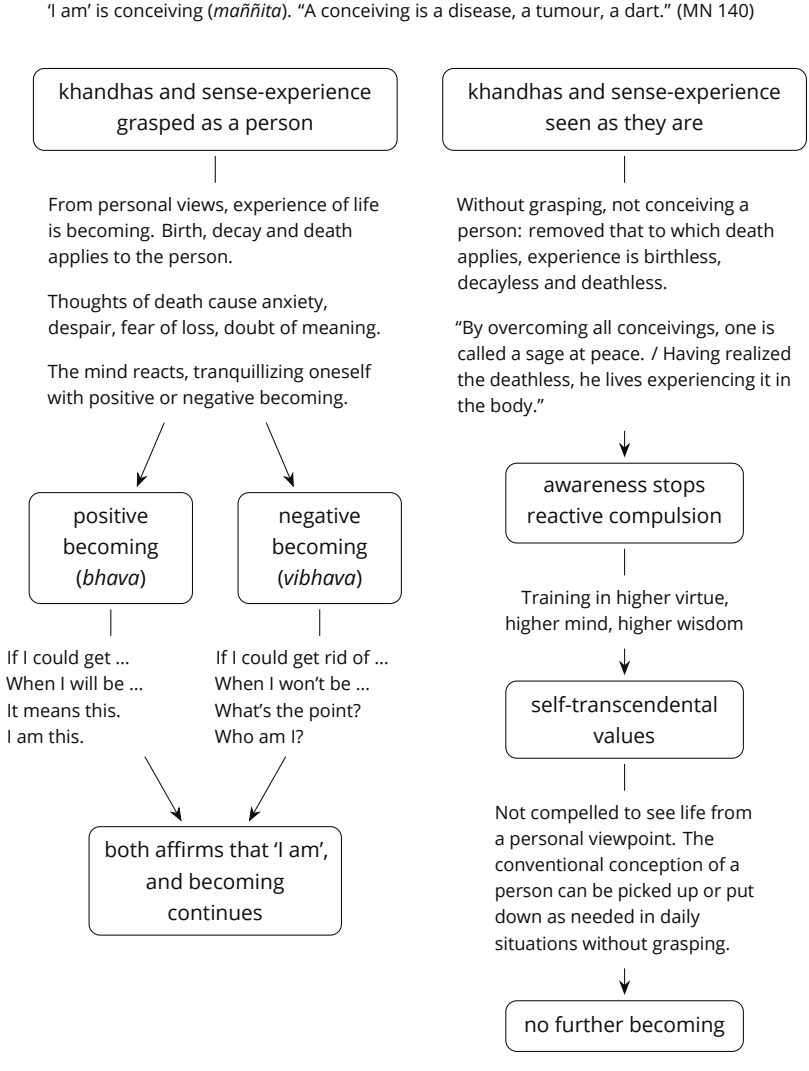
The problem is not that we don't know enough. The bookshelves are overflowing with good advice about 'how to be happy'. If that's all we need, where is the problem? If all it took was good advice, all of us would have gotten enlightened long ago. We hear and read about all the good

things we should do and what sort of person we should be: one book says we should be tough and fearless, while another says we should have universal compassion. It is a special kind of suffering to read it all.

Or perhaps we need *Nibbāna*? Is that the right idea? The meaning of the word is 'going cool', as in a fire ceasing to burn and growing cool. A craving to 'have it' means more fuel for the heat and burning of becoming.

But *Nibbāna* is the coolness of ceasing to burn with becoming, so should we become this non-becoming? The thinking mind goes, '*What?!*' And that's not a wrong answer either: the teaching of the Buddha points out that thinking and becoming are not sufficient tools here. Any other state or thought, when we see ourselves in it, will be as limiting as the previous one. We are not freed by *becoming* the right thing, but by recognizing that we can give up the compulsion to continue becoming.

Figure 7.3: Experience, Becoming and the Deathless



See also: Chapter 10, Birth, Decay and Death in The Buddha's Teaching: It's Essential Meaning by R. G. de S. Wettimuny

NEW EYES

turning toward experience, intellectual knowledge, watching the senses

We can turn a compulsive tendency into meditation practice by asking, 'How can I understand this experience?' This question directs us to the noble attitude towards suffering described in the Four Noble Truths: 'Suffering should be understood.' Discard the opinions which present themselves as answers, and keep returning to this open attitude of knowing the present.

Both joy and sorrow are natural processes, but if we don't understand them, we see one as a reward and the other as a punishment. Life never seems to be fair and it always seems to be out of our control.

To open up our attitude for contemplation, we can at least imagine the possibility that there is something here we can learn. A turning point occurs when we are able to let go of being sure about our opinions and can stop to investigate the experience itself.

Consider how narrow our attitude is when we start with the thought, 'I've seen this, I know this'. Perhaps this is true, but I notice that when I try to use that intellectual knowledge to solve a problem, my attention merely revolves around memories, thoughts and opinions. While I am caught up in the past, the present experience escapes my attention.

The instruction of the Buddha is to establish a careful intention to meditate, and to put aside the matters of the world.

> There is the case where a monk remains focused … ardent, alert, and mindful – subduing greed and distress with reference to the world.
>
> *MN 10, Mindfulness Meditation*

The thoughts and opinions don't become 'our knowledge', but we can understand the process of their arising and ceasing. '*What* is it that I am doing? *How* am I doing it?' Letting go of our fixed positions becomes the way forward; we discover it by seeing with new eyes.* Life may still not be fair or entirely under our control, but now we are familiar with a practice which makes the difference between knowing mental states and having a mental breakdown.

The fundamental principle is that watching the mind develops the mind. A wakeful awareness unbinds the compulsive tendencies. We cannot know what is going to happen tomorrow, but there will be change. The word 'Buddha' means 'one who knows, one who is awake'. The source of contentment in activity is that we continue to trust and practice living in this wakeful awareness.

* 'The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.' (Marcel Proust)

Silence

SIGNAL

relation with our surroundings

Two of us are walking down a path leading to the entrance of the monastery. We are talking about one thing or another, but as we enter, we notice the silence and our conversation stops. The Dhamma hall is through the next door, and we don't want to disturb anyone who might be meditating inside. We close the door quietly behind us. We are headed somewhere else in the building, but the significance of the Dhamma Hall is greater than that mundane task.

The silence of listening creates an implied relation with our surroundings. In the earlier case, with the person who might be sitting in the Dhamma Hall. But even if we could have seen that there was nobody inside, we would still lower our voices or stay silent. When we enter, the silence serves as a signal to pay attention. We give space for the values beyond ourselves represented by the Dhamma Hall being, as it is, dedicated to the truths of the heart and mind.

In this context, silence is a signal which directs us to remember that which is beyond the worldly values. When we enter a church, monastery or other sacred space, we look beyond the noisy, worldly affairs and beyond our usual preoccupation with ourselves.

We have enough experience of noisy chatter to know that profound comprehension is not found there. So we

fall silent to give attention to listening, to be a part of the understanding which we cannot express in words. We move in silence, we listen in silence. We carefully keep ourselves out of the way, so that we can hear the message of the place and let the activity speak for itself. This silence is a presence which is not isolating, but is rather inclusive of the space and the other beings who live there. In the words of David Whyte,*

> You can belong
> to everything
> simply by listening.

VALUABLE

value of silence, serenity in silence

Silence also expresses how much we value what we are doing. Being silent and maintaining attention is an expression of alertness and shows respect for the current activity. This is both an inward and outward signal. Others see that whatever we are doing, it requires silence. And we too witness ourselves being silent, when we voluntarily restrain our impact on ourselves and on our surroundings. This communicates that where we are and what we are doing is more significant than chattering about ourselves.

Calmness, understanding and silence are closely connected. We stop speaking and pay careful attention to investigate and understand phenomena. After this verbal

*The Winter of Listening by David Whyte

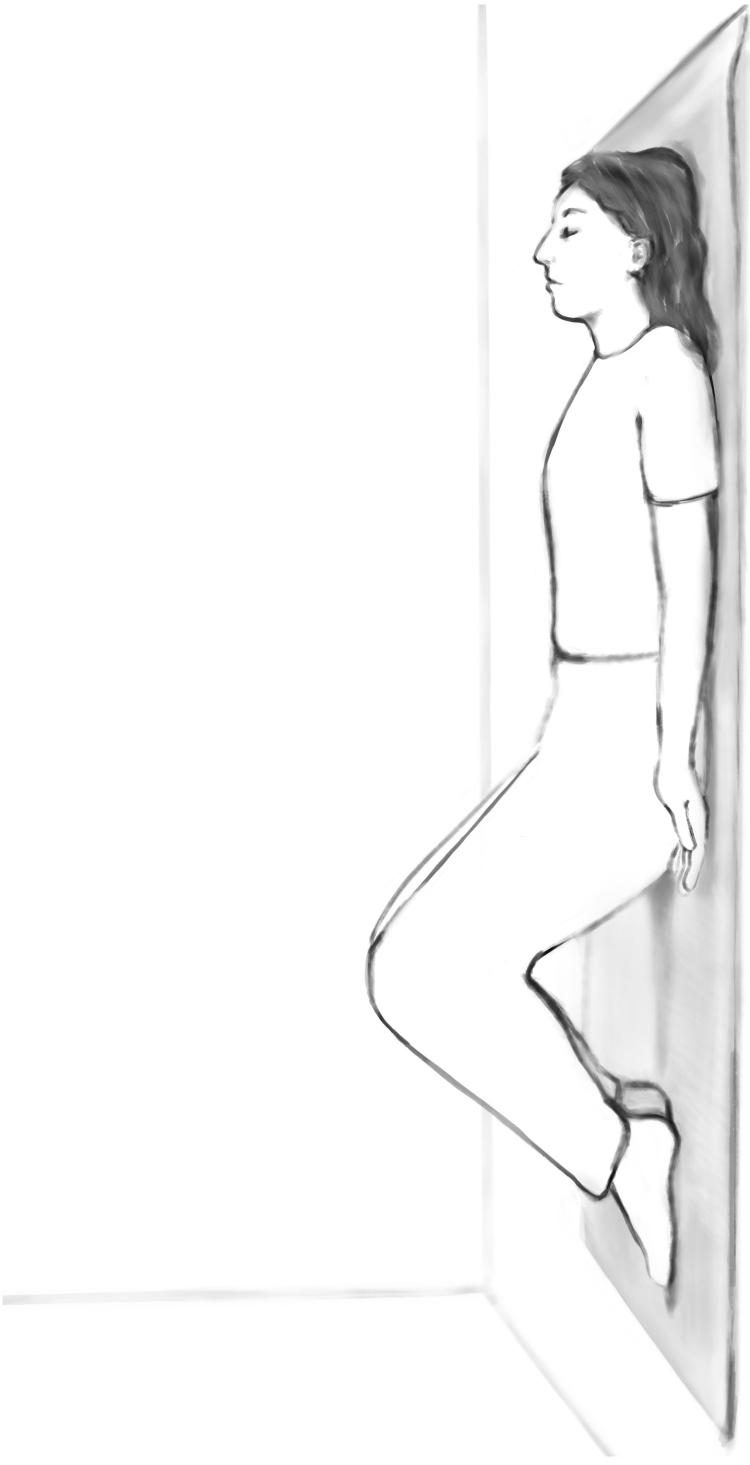
silence, the mind continues, 'Why? Why?' But when the penny drops, when there is that 'Aha!' moment, the mind stops chattering and we are silent, grateful for the understanding. In that content and serene mood, we stay silent. For the moment, nothing further is required.

> On hearing true teachings
> the hearts of those who are receptive
> become serene,
> like a lake, deep, clear and still.
>
> *Dhp 82.*[*]

LYING DOWN MEDITATION METHOD

Physical stillness is most characteristic in the lying down meditation posture. In this posture the muscles of the body are completely relaxed. Although this creates a sense of ease and comfort, one has to take care to avoid falling asleep. When you are physically tired, this posture is not recommended for formal meditation. Rather, sitting, walking or standing meditation are preferable as they raise the body's level of alertness through the physical effort.

[*] A Dhammapada for Contemplation by Ajahn Munindo (forestsangha.org)



Before lying down, determine a clear intention to be wakeful. This sets the suitable attitude and establishes some mental distance from our daily activities. To further cultivate this reverential tone, we can bow toward a Buddha shrine, and softly recite a short chant.

A yoga mat or soft carpet is useful to avoid getting sore when lying on the hard floor. If you feel the breath becoming obstructed as the head inclines backward, use a small pillow or a folded towel to prop up your head. Lying down in a bed might be too soft, and it reminds the body about sleeping.

Let the arms rest at the side of the body; if you place them on the belly or the chest, the rising and falling movement can be distracting. Pull up the knees, so that the feet can be flat on the mat and letting the lower back closer to the floor. This avoids tension in the joints and helps to maintain alertness.

Maintain this posture while relaxing the muscles in the body and cultivate physical stillness. Direct attention inward and use the sensation of breathing as your meditation object. Experiment with the breath. Use it to brighten the mind and maintain clear comprehension. If the mind drifts into dull greyness, drowsiness will follow. Setting a timer can be useful, either to signal the end of the session, or as a periodic reminder to remain alert.

THE EFFECT OF SOUNDS

noise exposure, available cognitive capacity

This doesn't mean that sound cannot be pleasant. Music clearly has therapeutic effects, and can help to relax an agitated mind. It may be *very good music* (in our opinion), but how many times in a row can we listen to it? The same single thing, when repeated over and over, turns from pleasant to painful in a short time. Have you listened to music for hours, but then still felt relieved when you turned it off? 'Good song, but I've been missing this silence.'

Sounds are input signals which stimulate the nervous system. Some sounds can feel good for a while with a positive effect, while other sounds cause irritation and distraction.

Noisy environments degrade attention and intelligence. You can probably remember how hard it is to think clearly when there is a construction site at your neighbour's property. Apart from anecdotal experience, medical studies have also measured how 'mental workload and visual / auditory attention is significantly reduced'* when being exposed to noise.

Mobile phones don't even have to make a sound to cause 'brain drain'. Another study found that 'the mere presence of one's own smartphone reduces available cognitive capacity'.**

*The Effect of Noise Exposure on Cognitive Performance and Brain Activity Patterns (ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)

**Brain Drain: The Mere Presence of One's Own Smartphone Reduces Available Cognitive Capacity (journals.uchicago.edu)

It is not surprising that traditional insight meditation retreats try to setup a silent environment and ask participants to not bring their mobile phones to the meditation hall, or to leave them in a locked place for the entire retreat. Give your nervous system a break and let it settle. Don't let it be like the crow in Santoka's haiku,*

> Cawing a crow,
> flapping a crow,
> with no place to settle down.

CHANTING

setting a clear intention, wholesome thoughts

At the monastery, we practise chanting before or after the daily group meditations. First, when we arrive individually to the Dhamma Hall, we bow three times in silence toward the Buddha shrine. The senior monk then rings a small bell to signal the start of the chanting. We wait in silence while he lights the candles and incense on the shrine, and then we bow again. During the bowing, there is always silence.

We begin the chanting together, synchronizing our voices: too soft and we can't be heard; too loud and it's harsh; chant out of tune and we're separated from harmony. (A good guideline is that if you don't hear your own voice, you are chanting too softly. If you can only hear yourself, you are too loud.) The text of the chants are recollections of the Buddha and his teachings. This is a practice of

*Grass and Tree Cairn, Taneda Santoka

directing the mind toward wholesome thoughts. This ordered, symbolic ceremony uses a rhythm of speech and action as a skilful tool to clear the mind before the silence of meditation.

The exact routine varies between monasteries. The morning meditation at Sumedhārāma in Portugal starts at 5am. We start with an hour of sitting meditation, during which there is no speaking or chanting. When you enter, there is silence – a shared space for inner reflection. At the end of the meditation the senior monk rings a bell and this is followed by 15-20 minutes of chanting.

BOREDOM

boredom, learning about the mind, inner peace, sense-restraint

'Doesn't it get boring?' From time to time, a school will bring a whole class of children to the monastery to meditate in silence (perhaps hoping that they will become more quiet afterward). Most likely, the majority of them feel terribly bored. They have no interest to be there from the outset. But children are clever and they often learn that they will escape sooner if they tolerate the strange ideas of adults.

When our regular visitors come to meditate, their relationship to this mental state is different from the outset. They come with an interest in learning about themselves and their mind. When you look closer at it, the 'boring' can become rather interesting. Boredom changes as soon as you look at it. 'Not much is happening, just the breathing. Is that a problem for me? Am I creating that problem? Can I stop creating such problems for myself? Sitting here and breathing is actually a pleasant feeling.'

When practising mindfulness of breathing, there is a gladness born of sense restraint. The mind relaxes, and the thinking can be allowed to stop. We are silently observing experience and there is no need to comment.

Boredom is a combination of factors: the desire for excitement and novelty, active dismissal of the present, and the attitude that we already know what is going to happen. Is it not intrinsic to the situation, but a habit of the untrained and restless mind.

The Buddha compared restlessness to how an elephant feels when the trainer first restrains him by tying him to a strong post. The elephant is unfit to train while he still longs to wander in the wilderness as he wishes. A good trainer gradually restrains the restless elephant, until they learn to remain content.* In the sutta, Prince Jayasena, who lives in a palace surrounded by distractions, doesn't even believe that inner peace is possible through sense-restraint, since he has never experienced such peace himself.

In the meditation hall the door is open, you can stand up and walk out any time. But you are there because you have felt that the untrained mind keeps making painful mistakes and causes trouble for itself and others. If you walk a thousand steps in a thousand directions, you will just get tired and angry that you didn't get anywhere. It is good to recognize the need to be the trainer of our restless mind. We learn what the right direction is and keep making steps in that direction.

*MN 125, The Level of the Tamed

For the mind that is difficult to subdue,
flighty, flitting wherever it will,
restraint is good,
a restrained mind brings happiness.

Dhp 35.[*]

SHRINE

creating sacred spaces, symbolism of a Buddha shrine

I didn't always create a Buddha shrine in the room or hut where I stayed at the monastery. In the beginning, I thought they were part of conforming to institutional expectations. So I mostly ignored and subtly resented pictures and statues. I felt other people expected me to venerate them, and with a contrary attitude, I wasn't going to do what (I thought) they expected.

My reaction was like that of the school kids: I was clever enough to tolerate the symbols and arrogant enough to think I already knew what they meant. Believing oneself clever makes one feel superficially dismissive and bored with everything. It is a self-stupefying combination. Thinking that *I know* closes our mind, so we can't find out that, in fact, we don't know. The British psychologist Iain McGilchrist compares this to being stuck in a labyrinth of mirrors:[**] all you can see is what you tell yourself, and you'll never find a way out.

[*] Dhammapada, translated by Ānandajoti Bhikkhu
[**] The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World by Iain McGilchrist

A small crack must have appeared on those mirrors, because eventually I picked up that nobody was making such expectations of me. I was creating both sides of the story and I felt consumed over something I only imagined.

Making a Buddha shrine opens up a small space in the place we live, a reminder to stop the hurry and make space for awakening. The Buddha shrine in the meditation hall gives us the same message through silence. A personal shrine is a gift for ourselves from ourselves. It is not for answering other people's expectations, or even for the Buddha. The historical Buddha passed away 2600 years ago and is beyond expecting or needing anything from us. Other people have enough to worry about and don't think about us as much as we assume.

I remember thinking, 'Why don't I have space for the Buddha in the place where I live?' Then I started to cut some wood planks and made a small shelf for the shrine. Buddha shrines are often quite plain: one or more Buddha figures, candles, incense and flowers. The Buddha represents awakened consciousness in the human form. The candles are for wisdom which makes things visible, as light in darkness. The incense can remind us when the Buddha spoke about virtue, 'the fragrance of virtue pervades all directions' (Dhp 54). The flowers are a symbol of virtue, happiness and impermanence. They are like our practice: they bring happiness if we take good care of them and renew them frequently; while their fading is a reminder of transience.

I offer these words of reflection with the intention that they may encourage your practice. The teacher is the Buddha, the source of illuminating explanations leads back

to him. I am grateful that his teachings have been carried on through the centuries by each generation up to this day. Let's use them to turn the noisy confusion of the mind into understanding silence.

List of Illustrations

List of Figures