

A Resource for the Practice of Meditation

by Jason Espada

Preface

I've collected the following short essays on the practice of meditation from writings I've done over the years. They are divided into two sections: first, those on cultivating calm and clarity, and second, the articles on insight practice. There are some schools that don't separate these two, and others that present them in sequence. Whatever tradition a person follows though, I think it's helpful to know at least the outlines of these two aspects of meditation practice.

When it comes to a basic practice of meditation, this is a very personal matter. We are encouraged to experiment until we find a method that works consistently for us. Then, with that as a reference point, it can be useful to introduce different ways of adjusting the mind, and seeing what improves our practice.

One last note here. You may notice that when calm and insight meditation are taught, they can sound very technical. They are almost always presented separately from the heart practices of loving kindness and compassion. I'm now thinking that doing at least a few minutes of metta, or loving kindness practice before formal sitting or walking can be a great help for calm and insight. I've included here just one brief essay on metta, and a simple meditation. For more information, I have an introduction to this practice called 'Metta as a support for meditation'. There is also a page with links to my favorite introductory audio talks on metta, on abuddhistlibrary.com, on Jason's page. See also "Living in Beauty – A Collection of Essays on Metta for Our Times".

May our practice of meditation steadily advance,
free of the faults of dullness and distraction,
May we all come to the end of suffering in this very lifetime,
and bring all others, without exception,
to that very same state

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Part I. Articles on cultivating calm and clarity

Metta as a support for meditation

When I first learned a simple method of loving kindness meditation in Thailand, from a monk named Phra Ingo, he suggested that I do a little of the practice before any calm or insight meditation. This has proven to be some of the best advice I've ever gotten. As we mature in metta practice of course we will have more to draw from, but right from the outset any amount of kindness we can generate towards ourselves will go a long way.

Start where you are

One of the basic principles of metta is that we start wherever we are this moment. On some days we're going to be more restless than usual, and this heart attitude of metta meets us wherever we are and whatever we're going through. When we start with generating some amount of goodwill for ourselves, it initially helps us to settle comfortably in our body, and to be present with ourselves, whatever our circumstances.

Further, when we're feeling restless or excited, the quality of loving kindness can hold these feelings, and gradually help us to become more calm. It is an accommodating heart and mind. It is an embrace. If we are sleepy or dull, metta helps there too, as it naturally brightens and energizes the mind. Such are its characteristics.

There is a teaching from the Zen tradition that I like, that brings a similar quality to our practice. They say that when the mind is restless it can be compared to a cow or a horse in a field. If we give it a larger pasture, so to speak, all by itself this will bring calm. The larger pasture in metta is the gracious accommodating heart. Whatever is going on we can hold it gently, and this is calming and assuring.

Metta is also warmly encouraging

Whether it is directed towards our most loved one, or towards ourselves, metta is that quality that would have us begin, and that gently urges us on. It has us take the next step, the one that is right in front of us. In Buddhist language, they say that the teachings in general are 'onward leading' and this is especially true of metta. It is the feeling of 'yes', that positive quality that says 'you can do this'. Since we need all the encouragement we can get,

metta is not only good in the beginning, it also helps our practice every step of the way.

In metta there is karuna, in love there is compassion

Meditation brings out all our noble qualities. On the way, and almost as soon as we sit and begin to practice however, we will meet with whatever is difficult for us – our impatience, fears, dissatisfaction, discouragement, anger, sadness, and so on. If we want to be able to stay with these feelings, to understand them more deeply and to transform them, we will find that we need not just a small amount of kindness and compassion for ourselves, but actually great kindness and great compassion. In that simple quality of goodwill is contained all we need to be with ourselves and others. In love there is joy and compassion that can manifest in whatever way and as much as is needed. This is heartening to know and to reflect on from time to time. And as we find just how much kindness and compassion is essential for our own happiness, it's natural then as well to begin to extend these same qualities to others. We can see they are as deserving, and that this is something we all need.

Metta brightens the mind

One of the qualities of metta that should be also highlighted when speaking about it as a support for meditation, is that it makes the mind clear and bright. This is important as we move past the initial stage of meditation. If we're not to slip almost right away into some form of dullness, we will need clarity and energy to work with, and the encouraging quality of metta and its inherent joy helps make this possible.

What's more, when it comes to insight practice as well, having strong metta is essential for seeing things fully as they are. Although insight practice mostly works with seeing through our concepts, and not being caught by them, for the qualitative aspect of our experience to register as something healthy and positive, we need love to be there in our mind and heart. Then this life can show itself as precious, and as worthy of all our devotion and care.

The whole arc of a contemplative life and meditation practice is in this way supported and guided by metta loving kindness. From sitting and walking meditation, to retreating, and re-engaging the world and all our loved ones,

metta is the principle that would have each of our steps be true, with each phase valued, and taken up with joy and with ease.

Metta Bhavana - Loving Kindness Meditation

To begin with, I sit upright, and relax. I close my eyes and allow myself to settle, becoming more calm, relaxed and harmonious.

I let go of thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

I observe how the breath is flowing in smoothly, and flowing out easily; free and harmonious.

Now I see a wonderful sun over my head, shining with warm, golden light.

This bright light of loving-kindness is streaming throughout my entire being. I can feel it; I feel well, and I am happy.

I. First person: Now I imagine one person who I love the most.

I see the warm, golden light of loving-kindness streaming to that person. This wonderful bright light is flowing through this person. This beloved person is surrounded by this light of higher love and kindness.

I can see the smile on their face. This beloved person feels well, and is very happy.

II. Second person: Next, I imagine one person who I like and respect.
... (as above)

III. Third person: Next I can see one person toward whom I have a neutral relationship. ... (as above)

IV. Fourth person: The last person I think of is one whom I have had difficulties, or someone who I dislike. ... (as above)

Now I see all four persons together, with the sun above them, and I see them all receiving the same amount of this warm golden light of loving-kindness.

They all feel well; they are all smiling, and they are all shining, and happy.

Then I let them go I peace and happiness.

Now, once more I see the warm sun above my head, and once again I am filled with feelings of happiness and well-being.

(optional:)

If necessary, at this point, I practice equanimity meditation:
Now, I allow myself to feel calm, and peaceful.

To conclude, I take a deep breath, and exhale slowly. I come back to the here and the now, and slowly open my eyes.

May all beings be happy.

The Centrality of Meditation in Buddhist Practice

When there is respect for meditation, the Doctrine will flourish; when respect for meditation decreases, the Doctrine will decline – The Buddha

In Buddhism, an appreciation for what the practice of meditation can accomplish for us is essential. Without it, there will be no interest in its practice, and no study, or engagement in meditation, and without practice, of course, there will be no result.

At its best, Buddhism is a functioning contemplative tradition, with individual practitioners linked to each other and to a rich heritage of teachers and realized beings, past and present. Here, the key to every benefit and virtue we might develop for ourselves and others is our right practice of meditation. Without this one essential practice, the mind wanders endlessly, staying on the surface of things. We start projects, and they don't get finished; we begin a line of thought, and end up somewhere else entirely, and what's worse, the mind is subject to all of the negative emotions that confuse and veil the mind. Such is the usual untrained mind.

When we are talking about the flourishing of a tradition, we are referring to people understanding what its effective practices consist of, and then taking up those practices diligently and enthusiastically over time, and gaining the result, which is increasing degrees of freedom from suffering, more and more joy and peace, kindness, sensitivity, and availability and resourcefulness to help others.

All this, we can see, relates to each generation and each person taking up the practice of meditation for him or herself. Without this, at best what we get are borrowed ideas, or what's worse, concepts that are misunderstood. When the ideas are not based on practice, they may sound fine, especially to other people who aren't practicing, but they lead nowhere. When the doctrine declines in this way, then of course there is no useful result, and people are completely right to say of such a path that it is of little value.

Now, what is meant by meditation? The word is common but the meaning in this context is both simple and profound. Meditation is just the method we use to quiet and focus the mind. In meditation, we settle down, and brighten and energize the mind, making it clear and serviceable. When we

have some practice that does this for us, then whatever other study or reflection we do can go deep.

We can complement formal meditation with mindfulness in daily life, doing one thing at a time, or simply aiming in that direction as we go about our day, which means carrying forward attentiveness, and not just letting the mind wander or be dispersed. When we bring some of the same quality of awareness from our sitting and walking practice into our daily activities, such as washing the dishes or driving, these too can become forms of meditation.

The practice of meditation, we can see, is always one of mindfulness and concentration. Be assured that without these, we may drift off into some pleasant or unusual states, but the practice has gone off track. If you're ever wondering whether you're on the right path of practice, just imagine continuing the way you're going at it for some weeks and months and years on end – and ask yourself, what would be the outcome? Only when there is mindfulness, and a gradual refinement of attention and concentration over time can we say we're going the right way.

Metta, ethics, wisdom and the practice of meditation

When results arise through *any practice*, such as metta, we can see they have a range of causes behind them, including the strength of concentration. This is how we accomplish our aims for both ourselves and others.

Another example: sometimes we may hear that ethics are fundamental in Buddhism, and while this is true, it has to be added that ethics have always been taught as part of the threefold training of ethics, meditation, and wisdom. Ethics alone would be temporary, whereas when it is practiced together with meditation and wisdom, it becomes more and more established in a person's life.

Ultimately, in Buddhism, it is insight that liberates. All schools of the tradition agree on this. A person here as well may have a glimpse, by intellectual understanding alone, of the inner freedom that is possible, but it is discerning insight joined with the strength of mind in meditation that brings about transformation and liberation, the aim of insight practice.

Meditation has such power because the mind itself is powerful. If we know how to use it, we can accomplish meaningful goals, and have something of lasting value to share with others.

When I go to centers, listen to modern teachers, or look at the average books on psychology or religion, I find very little on the basic practice of meditation and concentration, which leads me to think that in many places the doctrine is in decline. There doesn't seem to be much understanding or interest in this fundamental practice of being still and quieting and clarifying attention over time. The result is then naturally a lack of depth and effectiveness of practice, no matter how noble sounding or exalted the language used.

We may want to do ten thousand things, and indeed the needs around us are extensive, but our own skill and effectiveness depends on just how much of our innate resources we are able to access. This in turn depends on something so simple that it's easy to overlook.

I turn again to this teaching of the Buddha's because it is where I find myself these days, in need of being reminded vividly that all the results we seek for ourselves and all our relations depend on that central practice of quiet attentiveness we call meditation, done devotedly and compassionately, at once with a great aim, and with each particular event, and breath, and posture in mind.

A Basic Method of Meditation, and two commentaries

Meditation – the cornerstone of the contemplative life

I always enjoy reading the basic meditation instructions from noble teachers because, while they may seem simple, I know there is a great richness to them. What they are describing in these apparently simple teachings are the cornerstone of their contemplative life and practice. And they invite us with these instructions to unfold the fruit of the practice for ourselves.

Here is a basic method of meditation, as taught by Thich Nhat Hanh in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Feel free to use this, if it works for you.

This method uses mindfulness of breathing, along with what are called 'gathas', or short meditation poems. We can be in the sitting position, or walking.

In sitting meditation, we sit with our back straight, in a posture that is both relaxed and attentive. Then, we simply breathe naturally.

In mindfulness of breathing practice, gently, patiently, and with clarity, we aim to bring one hundred percent of our attention to the breath. Our full awareness is given to the breath, all throughout the complete length of the inhalation, and the exhalation.

To show how we practice this, Thich Nhat Hanh gave us this illustration of mindfulness 'following', or staying with the breathing: He held up a pen in his left hand, lengthwise, and said: 'Let's say this is the length of your breath'. Then he held up the first finger of his other hand and said, 'And let's say this finger is your mindfulness. When mindfulness touches the breath, it's like this: (so saying, he placed his finger on one end of the pen).

When we breathe in, if we choose to, we can think 'in' (and as he said this he moved his finger along the length of the pen to the other end), and when we breathe out, we can think 'out' (and so saying he moved his finger back along the pen to the starting point). 'In' (moving along the pen to the end), 'Out' (moving back to the beginning). This is how we should practice, with mindfulness staying in contact with the breath.

He continued, ‘When we leave our object, it’s something more like this: It would be like thinking ‘In’ (finger moving along the pen), ‘Out’ (and back), ‘In’ (and then) ‘Oh!, I forgot to turn off the light in my room’ (and with this the finger leaves the pen and flies off into the air...) This is called leaving the object, or distraction. Instead of being distracted, we should simply stay in touch with the breathing, all throughout the entire length of the inhalation, and the exhalation.

If at times you find that your mind is restless, it can be useful to practice counting the breaths. Mindfully follow the inhalation, and the exhalation all the way through, in a relaxed way, and at the end of the exhalation, count gently to yourself, ‘one’.

Breathing like this, you can count up to three, or four, ten, or twenty-one, as it suits your needs, and then start over again at one. If your attention wanders, just bring it back to the breath, and start over.

Another technique, offered by Ajaan Buddhadasa, in his book *Mindfulness with Breathing*, is to count the duration of an inhalation and exhalation, (for example, to the count of 5) and then to experiment with increasing this number (to 6, 7, 8, 9 or 10, or more). This automatically makes the breath longer, which relaxes us, quite naturally.

Practicing like this, conscious breathing with counting can be done at the beginning of a session, to settle and focus the mind, and to make it firm, before moving on to other methods, or it can be done for the whole session, as you wish.

When using the method of a gatha, in addition to this mindfulness of breathing, each line of a short meditation poem is repeated, to oneself, as many times as one likes before moving on to the next line. The first word is brought to mind on the inhalation, and the second word, on the exhalation. We can use one gatha, or more than one.

The first gatha offered here is:

in - out (a few times) (and then)
 deep - slow (a few times...)
 calm - ease

smile - release, and
 present moment - wonderful moment
 (or, 'present moment – there are wonderful things in this moment...')

The gathas are a means to direct and to quiet the mind. When the mind is calm, stable, and clear, we can choose to continue working with the gatha, reciting a line one or more times, and then letting go of words and just being with the inhalation and the exhalation for a few breaths. Or we can let go of the words completely, and just be with the experience of breathing in and out quietly, calmly and lucidly. See for yourself what works best for you.

As a general rule, we should keep our practice as simple as we can, and use only the minimum amount of method necessary to bring our mind to a settled, calm and clear state.

A second gatha, if you wish to use more than one, has both a long and a short version. After learning the longer meaning, if we wish, we can just use the shorter one. It goes like this:

Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in,
 breathing out, I know that I am breathing out

(practice as described above) (and then)

Breathing in, I see myself as a flower,
 breathing out, I feel fresh

Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain,
 breathing out, I feel solid

Breathing in, I see myself as still water,
 breathing out, I reflect things as they are, and,

Breathing in, I see myself as space,
 breathing out, I feel free

The shorter version of this, then, would be:

In, out

Flower, fresh
 Mountain, solid
 Water, reflecting
 Space, free

A third gatha is as follows. In this one, each line is said to oneself along with the exhalation:

I arrive
 I am home
 In the here
 In the now
 I feel solid
 I feel free
 In the Ultimate,
 I dwell

Walking Meditation

To wake up and steady the mind, or for a change of pace, to freshen the mind, you can practice walking meditation in a manner similar to that of sitting practice. Here, walking a little more slowly than usual, attention is placed on the breathing and on the contact between the feet and the ground. This is very soothing, very relaxing.

One method for walking meditation is to measure the length of the breath by the number of steps that are taken with the in-breath and the out-breath. ('one step, two steps, three, four... one, two, three, four...') (or, if walking more slowly, 'one..., two..., one..., two...'). Or, if you prefer, you can use a gatha, or you can just quietly follow your breath and the feeling of your foot touching the ground.

On the subject of walking meditation, Thich Nhat Hahn said, 'The quality of your walking depends on the degree of your concentration.' 'Don't lose any steps. If you have 100 steps, these 100 steps should be like 100 gems.', and, 'Each step can bring you peace and joy.'

Practice with patience, and with care.

My best wishes to you in your practice.

Factors in the unfolding of clear meditation

Preface: three points for reflection

Reflecting on the following, will, without a doubt, bring the motivation to practice consistently and enthusiastically, and to produce the result: that the mind can be developed limitlessly; that the more we develop the qualities of calm abiding, the clarity, peace, and calm continuity of attention, the better; and, that there is a great need, and many profoundly meaningful advantages for us all to doing this: we will be better able to free our own mind from confusion and affliction; we will be able to more effectively develop any quality or realization we would like, and we will be better able to help others in many ways.

Because of kindness and compassion for ourselves and others, then, we cultivate the path. May all beings benefit.

How to develop calm and clarity in meditation:

factor one: mindfulness

We begin any practice of meditation by establishing mindfulness. We place our awareness on an object and continue to direct our mind to whatever we are meditating on, in this case, our breathing and our posture, or our breathing and the experience of walking. We can say, if there is mindfulness, then there is meditation, and if there is no mindfulness, but only dullness or sleep, or getting lost and carried away by distraction, then there is no meditation.

Losing the object and coming back to it repeatedly is still meditation, but it is the returning, or having the intention to return repeatedly and cultivate our calm, steadiness of attention, mindfulness, and non distraction that characterizes this as being meditation.

As we enter the practice, Ajaan Lee taught, we learn to keep the mind firmly centered in a single object. Gradually, can we learn to do this more

purely, and for greater lengths of time. This is only possible when there is awareness. Let this much be clear then: in meditation, mindfulness should be there in the beginning, in the middle and in the end.

factor two: relaxation

The kind of mindfulness that can be used as a basis for further development arises from being settled, relaxed and at one's ease. So, after establishing mindfulness, next comes relaxation, a letting go, and being at ease.

We can direct our efforts primarily to sustaining a steady flow of awareness, as Gen Lamrimpa taught, emphasizing calm stability first. This means practicing with a relaxed continuity of attention. The result of doing this is a kind of clarity that arises on the basis of relaxation.

At the beginning, or at times in the intermediate stages it's ok if our mind and meditation are not too clear or settled. Throughout a session, it's good enough if we are able to maintain the level of clarity that we begin with. We don't want to slip into dullness either, so there is this balance to aim for, between being relaxed and at the same time maintaining a certain strength of clarity.

We can't force a stable kind of greater clarity to happen, but it arises by itself as part of this process: If we are practicing correctly, by relaxing, and steadily letting go of thoughts as they arise, by not grasping them, not following them, and by gently, diligently, and mindfully attending to our object of meditation, then naturally, both more calm and clarity will come, in their own time. (with gratitude to Alan Wallace for his clear explanation of this teaching)

factor three: settling down, stillness, and silence

If we practice in this way, with some continuity, then the mind begins to calm down. We can identify an inner silence and a sense of serene stillness, and this brings more quietude, clear refreshment, and well being. Proceed and cultivate the sense of this sublime stillness with awareness; and enjoy this restful silence, inner quiet, and calm with clarity.

factor four: a self awareness that adjusts the quality of attention as needed

To continue to guide and to improve the quality of the mind, from time to time we can use an overall awareness of the process to check up on the quality of the mind itself that is engaged in the practice.

Once we know what calm and clear meditation is, and how to go about producing it and cultivating it, then our awareness of the process and adjustments we make, if any, can be entirely natural. They can be done without having to thinking about it too much, if at all. So study is important up to the point of understanding, at first conceptually, and then intuitively how to guide one's practice:

If there is any dullness at all, then gently, and gradually, in the meditation session and over time, bring more of the quality of clarity and wakefulness, vividness and discernment. And if there is any distraction or dispersion, then relax more deeply, calm the body and the mind, and bring more precision, focused mindfulness, or collectedness.

In all of this it's best if we can practice consistently, with compassion for ourselves, and with compassion for others, with patience, and with enthusiasm.

We can sustain a good continuity in our meditation by having a strong motivation to practice, and clear confidence in the path that we are on, and then by not grasping at results: good, bad or indifferent, determine to simply keep practicing.

The result of this kind of meditation, cultivating the qualities of calm abiding in any amount, is increased flexibility, or pliancy, in that the mind is relatively more and more free of distraction and dullness. This is a mind that is by degrees more serviceable. To the extent that we practice and actualize this pliancy, suppleness, or service-ability, to that extent we can use the mind in any way we would like. Any efforts we can make in this direction will be worthwhile.

From Distraction to Single Pointed Concentration

There is a useful teaching from Tibetan Buddhism that describes the various degrees of distraction or concentration that we have at any given time. They speak of three kinds of excitation:

First, gross excitation is where the mind disengages from its object, losing track of it completely, and takes up another object. Basically, the mind jumps from one thing to another, entirely forgetting the what we were doing just a moment before.

Second, medium excitation is where, we are still aware of what we were attending to, but *the central focus* has shifted to another object. For example, someone driving could hear a news report and shift that content to the center, with the driving still on the periphery. There is still some continuity with the first object, but we are switching what is central.

{In our modern, restless, ADD world, I think that we are almost continually ‘cultivating’ these two – gross and medium excitation.)

and the third, subtle excitation, is where we are mainly aware of what we are attending to, but there is still some conceptual activity or other things that we are aware of at the same time

With single-pointed concentration, we are absorbed in what we are engaged with, so much so that externals, or whatever was there on the periphery doesn’t engage our interest or attention at all. These other things can disappear from our awareness for a time. We’ve all had the experience many times of being completely focused on something in this way, but usually we have no control. That’s what meditative cultivation is for. We can consciously, intentionally cultivate more of the experiences of single pointed concentration.

The description of this continuum, from distraction to full awareness, I’ve found, is quite useful to know. Then, so we don’t just get caught up on a conceptual level when observing ourselves, in practice, it’s best if we can just apply ourselves to cultivating a steady awareness of our chosen object.

Then can this teaching have a positive effect for us. Stated simply, as Ajaan Chah taught, ‘Just be aware of whether the mind is concentrated a little or a lot. That way it will develop on its own.’

About A Concise Verse Summary of Calm Abiding Meditation

From a letter to a friend

Robert, thank you for your kind words. It took about 15 years to get it to this brief a form... and I'm working with it still...

This particular teaching, 'Calm Abiding', is found mostly in the Gelugpa Lineage of the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition, but it is in the Kagyu and Sakya as well. When I first came across this teaching, usually a chapter in a book, I'd photo copy that chapter, and study it. I ended up with a thick folder from different books, all presentations of the same material.

Then, about 1992 or 1993 I came across "Samatha Meditation" by Gen Lamrimpa - now published as "Calming the Mind", which is a complete book - talks given at a one year Samatha retreat, all on the subject of Samatha meditation. It's a great book - the most straightforward and thorough presentation of the subject, by far.

I proceeded to work with this material in the same way as I had with other teachings I wanted to get the most out of - I read and meditated on these teachings, and eventually copied out long excerpts for my own study.

Then, in 1998 I had the opportunity to make a retreat in Nepal focussed on this book. I re-read the book and wrote a verse summary, including some other teachings and perspectives on the practice from the years of working with this material. That long verse summary I've not yet shared with anyone, but I plan to. I believe it's around 60 verses or so.

I've long wanted to do a second retreat on this material, to see if I could write a concise form of what I have been carrying around these last few years. I was regretting that I have not had the time or good fortune to make this retreat yet, when, lo and behold, in January of 2006, as I was resting on the floor of my converted bus, my temporary living arrangement here in Phoenix, the verses started to come to mind.

Anyone who's had to wait, or who's learned to wait for the right time knows the feeling... so I wrote these down, not expecting that they'd do what I've

planned, which is to summarize these noble teachings, but I'm actually quite pleased with how they came out... go figure.... life is mysterious...

Feel free to share this history too, if you like, my friend. And thanks for your encouragement. May all beings benefit.

A Concise Verse Summary of the Practice of Calm Abiding Meditation

1. The key point is that
when calm abiding is properly manifest
it is a state without dullness or distraction.
2. On the path of meditation,
until a correct and full result is manifest,
as long as one is oriented towards right meditation,
knowing what it is,
and progressing,
this is proper practice.
3. Instructions on calm abiding meditation,
the result clearly known,
and the practices that produce the result
should be thoroughly digested
so that discursive thought
need seldom be utilized during the meditation session.
4. When right orientation arises spontaneously,
and adjustments are made without an act
of conscious intent,
this is the sign that the calm abiding teachings
have been assimilated.
Until then, study, and more reflection are necessary.
5. To go further, in brief: Dullness and distraction,
day dreaming, wandering, the mind jumping about,
or part of the mind ‘branching off’,
in themselves are not meditation.
Yet if these are experienced and passed through
as natural occurrences on the way to clarity and calm stability,
these become part of the path of practice.
6. Calm stability refers to staying with an object of awareness
in an awake and relaxed way,

and clarity here refers to the full clarity of the knowing mind itself.

7. It is essential to understand that
there are both gross and subtle
dullness and distraction
And that in practice, if done correctly,
progresses from the gross levels to the finer ones;
one passes through them and gradually removes them.
8. Contemplations on impermanence, karma,
the wish to liberate the mind, the need for ethics
and calm abiding
as a basis for effective wisdom practice;
loving kindness, and the wish to benefit others,
all these contemplations, done in separate sessions,
can fortify practice,
and if done enough
can produce spontaneously arising adjustments
to dullness and distraction.
9. In the meditation session themselves, without thinking about it,
simply know how the mind behaves
if it is stable and clear, and if so to what extent
During the session itself,
mindfulness of the meditation object
is absolutely the main practice.
10. Adjust and proceed as necessary
with walking meditation,
throwing water on the face, and washing the feet,
adjusting posture, and understanding meditation practice,
practice will eventually bear good fruit.

Colophon: Calm abiding is a beneficial practice in itself, and when developed, calm abiding empowers all other virtuous activity. In order to help make these teachings clear and accessible to more people, and to further acquaint my own mind with them, I've written this concise verse summary. May all beings benefit.

A Travelogue Through the Nine Stages of Calm Abiding Meditation

Written on retreat in 2012 and 2013

A confession to start with

To be honest, from the time in the early 1990's when I first read about calm abiding meditation, I never felt much of a connection with the part they call 'the nine stages'. Until this last year, it just seemed to be one of the many lists you find in Buddhism – too intellectual, and unapproachable. But then something shifted for me this last year while I was on retreat, listening to talks, reading these teachings again, and trying to apply them in practice. *Two differences* emerged for me, that opened the way, so that these teachings became more workable.

The *first* was that, instead of trying to adapt myself to a teaching outside of myself, I started to see how they could also be taken as describing a process that naturally unfolds for a person who is cultivating calm and clarity in meditation. My reference point shifted, to how my own practice is going, week by week, day by day, session by session, or even within a session.

And second, instead of taking the levels as entirely separate from each other, and always wondering, or, getting caught up in checking to see what stage I was on, I found that their distinct qualities are something that can be noticed, to our advantage, and regularly worked with, to stabilize and enhance in practice.

This is not to say the levels are all mixed up – they retain their individual characteristics – but for me, these are qualities of the mind in meditation that can be identified, and their causes cultivated, so that they become a more stable part of our experience.

So these are what I'll try to briefly describe in this paper.

My sources

I've drawn primarily on three sources for what follows:

First, Venerable Rene Fesui's teachings, called 'The Power of the Focused Mind', (available online);

Second, a recording of a series of teachings on 'shine', or calm abiding meditation by the Venerable Lama Lodru, given in San Francisco, in 1992; and third, teachings by B. Alan Wallace, from his writings and translations, and the dvd course titled 'The Way of Shamatha' (2008).

I've also brought together with these, the teachings by Thich Nhat Hanh on breath meditation, particularly his commentaries on the Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing, and the teachings of Ajahn Buddhadasa, on this same sutra.

The teachings of Ajaan Lee and Ajaan Pasanno have also proven very useful here.

These are all contributing factors.

A candid admission of my limitations

In what follows, I feel I only have some personal connection with stages one through seven. These are what I can identify at least something of in my own experience. As for the eighth and ninth stages, I'll just do my best to present what I've heard and read about.

Hopefully, this will be like drawing a map of what you've seen yourself, and then making it known when you are sketching the part you've just heard about. If others who've taken this practice further than I have would like to revise or add to this, they are more than welcomed.

And so, in brief, here are the names, and descriptions of what are called the nine stages.

1. The first stage is called 'Placement'. It's described as the mind being mostly off of its object. This is how it is when we're beginning in meditation.

The image that comes to mind is that it's like placing a dry leaf on a rock on a windy day – right away it flies off.

2. The second stage is called ‘continued placement’, or ‘re-placement’. This is putting the mind back on the object of meditation, such as the breath, again and again.

Here, the mind is, more or less, 50% on the object, and 50% off. This would be like putting the leaf back on the rock, again and again... and maybe putting a rock on top of it, to keep it in place.

I have the image of a child, attentively engaged in doing something like this, - leaf flies off, putting the leaf back, leaf flies off, putting it back, and so on - as if it were a game, making efforts, laughing, and enjoying it...

3. The third stage is called ‘patch like placement’. This is where the mind stays on its object for a while, and then slips off. Here it is *mostly on* the object of meditation.

4. The fourth stage is called ‘continual placement’. This is where one part of the mind is on the object continually, *even if* the mind is restless, or wanders, or is dull.

In cultivating the qualities of calm abiding meditation, one passes through degrees of dullness and excitement, that can be spoken about, in general, as being *gross, medium, and subtle* dullness or excitement.

In these first four stages of meditation, we pacify, at least somewhat, the very gross level of these, otherwise we’d just be wandering off completely all the time, (which is very gross excitement), or completely unaware of what’s happening, as if asleep (which is very gross dullness).

5. The fifth stage, I call ‘brightening the mind’.

Traditionally this stage is called, variously, ‘Taming’, or ‘Subduing’, or ‘Controlling’.

At this point, however, I’m departing from the usual names, and here are my reasons for doing so: when I compared the descriptions of this level across a range of traditional sources, and brought that together with what I found in I could work with in practice, I found this name, brightening the mind, to be much more fitting.

In addition, I noticed that the qualities in this stage and the next line up with steps ten and eleven of the Anapanasati Sutta – the Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing, and its commentaries. Here, we are cultivating freshness and vividness in practice, or, as they express it in the breathing sutra, the quality of joy, or ‘gladdening the mind’.

As Ajaan Pasanno taught, ‘It’s when the mind and body are energized that it can settle in a way that’s very stable, without slipping into sloth and torpor’.

Of the three (general) levels of gross, medium, and subtle dullness and distraction, as I said, the first four stages of the practice lessened the very gross levels of both dullness and distraction, and now at this, the fifth stage, we get to begin working on lessening the - generally termed – ‘middling level of dullness’. Hence, I call it gradually ‘brightening the mind’.

With the continuity described emerging gradually in practice, and identified as the main characteristic of stage four, this becomes possible. *We have something to work with.*

One of the useful things about an outline such as this is it shows us where to place our energy and effort, depending on how our mind is doing, session by session, or even within a sitting.

It shows us how, for example, we can’t expect to be bright, stable and clear right off. First, we establish some continuity, even if the mind is somewhat dull, or restless.

At the same time, we do need at least *some* clarity from the beginning, or we wouldn’t even know when we’d gone off the object- but just enough. Most of our energy and attention, in the unfolding earlier stages should be given just to developing continuity. This lines up with what’s taught.

I find it helpful that we don’t have to struggle unnecessarily for clarity in the beginning, and also to know that some amount of distraction too will be there, until pacified in the later stages of meditation. It can save both time and energy to know this.

I find one teaching by Thrangu Rinpoche to be especially useful to reflect on at this point. It is from the book ‘Creation and Completion’

‘During this practice (of meditation), a subtle problem can arise called ‘the dregs of mind’ or the ‘dregs of awareness’.

This is the presence of subtle thoughts running through your mind even though your mind is basically at rest and there are no fully conscious thoughts present. These subtle thoughts are also called the ‘undercurrent’, because they are an almost undetected current of thought that runs on a barely conscious level.

The undercurrent is in fact a greater problem for meditation than either torpor or excitement and cannot be allowed to continue on its own. The solution to the problem of the undercurrent is to tighten up your mind a little bit; to bring out or enhance the lucidity of your mind, to strengthen or toughen the edge of your awareness.

As important as being undistracted is, it is very difficult to develop a state of meditation for long periods of time in which you are never distracted. The reason this is difficult is lack of training. It is not particularly that we are doing it wrong, it is that we need to practice meditation a great deal in order to develop this level of freedom from distraction. So if you find that you still become distracted, don’t be discouraged, just continue.

Question: Could you please say more about how to tighten up our minds and toughen the edge of our awareness?

Rinpoche: Essentially the tough edge or sharp edge of awareness is what is meant by effort in meditation. Sometimes when we meditate, we practice it and experience a conscious relaxation of the mind. At other times meditation involves a conscious and hard-headed refusal not to become distracted – the attitude, ‘I must not become distracted’. At different times one should emphasize one or the other of these. When one slackens and needs to exert more effort, then one sharpens one’s awareness through this hard-headed intention, which is the refusal to space out.

6. The sixth stage is called ‘pacifying’.

As it happened when moving from stage four – where we had a degree of continuity to work with, to brighten the mind in stage five, here, because of *that* cultivation, we have something more to productively work with.

In stage five, we lessened middling dullness, by promoting more clarity, and gradually brightening the mind. Here, we move to lessening the middling level of excitement, or distraction. We experience more and more of a unification of mind with our object.

We can see how this is all working, looking back – how, because of what we accomplished in the preceding stage, we have a basis to productively engage our mind, bringing out more of the qualities of clarity and stability.

All along the way, we can notice that if we were to try to mostly cultivate any of these qualities before enough of a basis were there, we might not be successful at all. Or, we may have some success, but the practice would be more difficult than it needs to be. So, taking it one step at a time, as described here, is really the most practical and efficient thing to do.

7. Stage seven is called ‘Thoroughly Pacified’, and refers to pacifying *the tendency* to dullness and excitement. Venerable Rene compared the sense of it as being something ‘like a dog that wants to pull away while you’re walking it’. This is something you can feel before it happens. In a similar way, the sense of dullness and distraction *wanting to* arise can be felt and known, and pacified so that we stay with our object more comfortably, and with clarity.

I’ve spent some time the last few months, just looking at the last three stages described here – the fifth, sixth, and seventh, and I’ve found the descriptions of these processes to be very useful, especially in outlining in some detail the gross and middling levels of dullness and excitement, and how they can be gradually removed through practice.

This much, I feel, naturally leads to engaging the more subtle levels.

8. The eighth stage is called ‘One pointedness’. In this stage, they say, with the previous obstacles to calm abiding removed, now only a small amount of effort is required in meditation.

From what they say, it is a process of further familiarization with clear and calm meditation.

and,

9. The ninth stage is called 'Equipoise'. It's taught that this is characterized by an absence of effort in meditation, and that here one can easily stay in meditation for as long as one wishes.

It's my hope that this outline is as useful to others as these teachings have been to me. It didn't occur to me until last year, how the nine stages could be focused on and worked with separately. Now, though, I've seen it can have real practical value.

Notes on calm abiding meditation

On the five faults and eight antidotes

The aim of calm abiding meditation is to develop the qualities of calm and clarity. The mind can then be used more effectively to look into the nature of things. Calm, in this context, refers to a continuity of attention, and clarity, to a lucidity of the knowing mind itself. By saying this at the outset, it's hoped that, whatever details follow, this principle aim is kept in mind. Then, all the different aspects of teachings have their place.

In the Traditional teachings on Calm Abiding meditation, the first topics that are covered are what are called the five faults and the eight antidotes. These can be briefly described as follows:

The first fault is laziness, a dis-inclination to engage in practice, or 'the absence of delight in the wholesome'. Laziness can take the form of attachment to comforts and pleasures, procrastination, and self doubt, discouragement, or self deprecation.

I heard inertia described as 'the tendency to remain at rest, if at rest, or in motion, if in motion'. This is how it is when we're feeling either leaden, and physically and mentally unwilling to move, or restless, and not doing anything about that – both of these can be recognized as forms of inertia. Whatever keeps us from starting, or keeping going in a productive, positive direction that's needed, that's laziness in one form or another.

The correctives, or antidotes to laziness are four:

hearing teachings, in this case, on the advantages of cultivating the qualities of wakeful calm abiding meditation;

reflecting on the teachings, and developing faith in them, thinking them over again and again, and considering the great advantages to a practice such as this;

believing there is benefit to be gained, and that we can do this practice ourselves, and get the results – this is faith

To whatever extent we are able to cultivate these qualities, in addition to the immediate results of more peace and clarity in our mind, there will also be more depth and effectiveness to whatever we study and practice.

Recognizing this naturally gives rise to

an *aspiration* to cultivate the qualities we have heard about, *and* an *enthusiastic engagement with practice*

which gives rise to

pliancy, which is the actual resultant antidote to laziness.

Here, pliancy, a malleability, or flexibility of mind, is an absence of inertia, or resistance to engaging in practice. As Gen Lamrimpa describes it, such pliancy doesn't come all at once, but intermittently. Gradually, as we practice, the times when we experience such pliancy, or the freedom from any sort of resistance comes up more strongly and clearly, and lasts longer.

The second fault is *losing the object*, and this is corrected by the fifth of eight antidotes, that of *mindfulness*. Mindfulness here means keeping with the object of attention. We know what we are doing and why we are doing it.

Other terms that have been used to describe this function include: wakefulness, attention, and awareness. The idea here is that we stay with the object, or recognize when we have strayed from it. What accomplishes this is mindfulness.

The third fault is *not recognizing the presence of either dullness or distraction*.

We may have some awareness, or continuity of attention going, but if these factors of middling and subtle levels of distraction and dullness are not recognized and removed, we can stagnate in the development of the qualities of calm abiding.

Someone can even get caught in counter productive states, that may be comfortable enough, but that are lacking the promotion of clarity. If a person's not careful, they can get caught there for a long time.

We learn to recognize the presence of any degree of either dullness or distraction through what is called *introspective alertness*. This is an awareness of the general quality of meditation itself. It's function has been described as quality control.

Then, having noticed dullness or distraction, if we don't adjust our meditation to dispel these, this is the fourth fault, called

non-application (of the antidotes to dullness or distraction) This is corrected by *applying the antidotes* to either dullness or distraction.

On the levels, or degrees of dullness and distraction

Dullness or distraction can be talked about as having gross, middling and subtle levels. In practice, we work first with the gross and then the middling and subtle. Gross dullness would be sleepiness, lethargy, heavy obscurity of mind, like being enveloped in a thick fog, or covered with heavy blankets. Middling dullness would be some fogginess of mind, or the lack of keenness to our faculties.

And to begin to describe or detect subtle dullness, we have to compare ourselves at our best moments, of cognitive lucidity, vividness and sharpness of mental focus, with more ordinary states.

Sometimes there is clarity there, but it isn't as bright and clear as it could be (compared to what we've known, even briefly, or conceived of as possible).

Gross distraction is when the mind just leaves its object, is without any stability of attention, and just wanders from object to object, from mental experience to mental experience.

This is no different than ordinary, non-lucid dreaming.

A middling level of distraction can be associated with tracking some other objects of attention, even when we are engaged in doing something. This is

what we call, and are accustomed to, as multi-tasking. Obviously, there is a range to this, that we can notice for ourselves. We can gradually be pulled by this level of distraction, or divided attention, until it becomes the gross form of distraction, losing track completely of what we were doing.

Restlessness can be included here, as some quality of our body-mind that isn't settled. It manifests as what we can feel like we're struggling against to maintain attention on what we're doing. And the subtle levels of distraction, or excitement, again, can be known in reference to our own experiences of being really with some experience, with undivided attention, for however long it lasted.

We've probably heard of the term 'peak experience' - this refers to a time when we were fully engaged, awake, and comfortable, such that the experience had an effortless quality to it. The mind was then naturally unified and stable. Compared to this quality of attention, we can begin to notice what is less than this, the more subtle degrees of distraction.

Antidotes

The antidotes to these factors of dullness or distraction can be divided into those we use immediately before meditation, in an actual session of meditation itself, and in those we cultivate separately (again, working from the most gross to the more and more subtle levels) before a session, to counter dullness, we can:

adjust things so that we're wearing lighter clothes

make sure we have plenty of fresh air, by meditating outside, or with a window open

not eat too much heavy food, or too soon before practice

the antidotes for dullness within a session are:

to lift up one's gaze

to intentionally bring more energy to what we are doing

practice in shorter sessions, with enthusiasm

Ajaan Passano, suggested these antidotes to what are called ‘sloth and torpor’ in the Theravada Tradition:

consciously putting forth effort into the meditation object;

bringing up recollections of the Dhamma;

visualizations of light;

opening the eyes;

really energizing the posture;

getting up and doing walking meditation;

or,

standing outside in the fresh air

To counter dullness separately from sessions specifically for developing the qualities of calm abiding, we can cultivate those qualities that brighten the mind, such as loving kindness, and joy; an appreciation of our precious human life, and our spiritual aspirations; we can also work to purify our obscurations, through confession practices, or generally by cleaning up our act ethically

To counter distraction, or excitement before a session, we can:

wear warmer clothes

sit someplace darker

eat heavier foods

then, during a session of meditation, to counter distraction, we can

lower our gaze

relax, and bring more calm into the practice then and there (always keeping mindfulness)

practice more, in longer sessions, with patience, and a long view

in separate sessions, to counter distraction, we can

contemplate those things that lessen attachment, such as the truth that worldly pleasures bring no lasting satisfaction, and that pursuing them is potentially endless;

we can contemplate mortality, or the sufferings of our own life (to bring renunciation, and the wish for liberation) and the sufferings of all others, (to bring the wish to benefit them in the fullest possible way, by ourselves fully accomplishing the path, which is bodhicitta) we can also develop greater mindfulness in our daily activities, as a support for meditative cultivation, which will then positively influence all of the rest of our days and nights.

The fifth fault can be called *over application*. This is when everything is going well, proceeding nicely, organically unfolding as it should, and yet we continue to apply antidotes to dullness and distraction. Over application is remedied by *non application* of the antidotes when they are not needed.

This last fault, and its remedy, I've found, is something that rises up and should be skillfully dealt with fairly early on in the course of practice. If a person has any obsessive compulsive tendencies *at all*, or just loves, or is the least bit proud of their intellectual abilities, understand things on a conceptual level alone, then, I'm pretty sure that over application will be an obstacle – in other words, it will get in the way of actually practicing so we begin, and continue to get some meaningful results. The antidote in this case, as it is in the later stages of practice is the same, that is, to let well enough alone, and to let these factors come together, with enough faith that they will work if we let them.

With time, increasing relaxation, and mindfulness, understanding what we are doing, and why, step by step, good results will certainly arise.

A method for those oppressed by desire

The suffering of physical desire leads people to many different places in their life, from wrong relationships, to overeating, drugs and alcohol, obsessive activity, indulging desire, with porn for example, and even to religion and spiritual practices. The difficulty of being at peace in one's body when single is something we strive for, with varying degrees of success.

What I'm going to write out here is a method I developed from a few different sources that has worked for me to alleviate physical discomfort without adverse side effects associated with other ways of dealing with desire. I found my way to this technique while on a one-year solitary retreat, in 2012. It worked for me then, and is a method that's proven itself for me here again in 2016.

Of the meditation methods I've used, those of calming the mind and developing the insight into what's called emptiness (or lack of intrinsic existence of the self) and the nature of mind are ones I have faith in, and aim to cultivate. These take time to develop, however, and are not always easy to maintain for a lay person living in the city, without obstacles or distractions. Other methods, such as prayer, or mantra, can also work to bring relief and peace, but what I will describe here is what I've found to be most quickly and reliably effective. This is something I wish I had years, and even decades ago, as it would have saved me a lot of struggle and grief. In retrospect, there were times that such a method would have been worth many times more to me than all my possessions.

I've hesitated to write this out for a few reasons. One is that I'm not sure how many people would believe that what I will describe would be effective for them. Even fewer would try it out. Another reason I've held back is because this is something of a hybrid method - you won't find it in any texts, as I'll describe it. However, seeing as there is this great need in the world for a method such as this, with the recollection of my own suffering as a background, and the thought that it could help even one other, I felt I at least had to write this out, and to offer it.

As a preface to this method, I should mention two things: first, that it entails visualization, and, feeling the movement of energy in one's body. I realize that some people don't have these abilities, however, they may like to

experiment in any case, especially if they are looking for a way out of this particular suffering.

Becoming aware of the breath sensations can possibly help a person to become more aware of how energy moves in their body. What is to be aimed at here is the feeling of energy being guided by the use of the imagination. As they say in metaphysics - thought leads, energy follows. This is something we should be able to know for ourselves.

In the practice I will describe, we are working to cultivate the sense of energy upward.

What I will present is a mix of what is traditionally called ‘Powa’, or ‘Phowa’, and the recitation of the mantra and the recollection of the bodhisattva-deity Avalokiteshvara.

Powa is a technique taught for transferring the consciousness to a pure land at the time of death. It can be done for oneself, or for another. When done for oneself, the method involves visualizing one’s consciousness moving up the central channel in the body, and exiting through the crown of one’s head, where it is received by the heart of Amitabha, the Buddha of Light. This is one form of the practice, in brief.

Because this is not being done here at the time of dying, it is a variation of powa, using some of its elements, as will be seen.

I looked for some of the warnings about this method, and compared what they said with my own experiences and decided that what I’m doing and setting out here is perhaps in some ways more akin to a Taoist-energetic yoga method, called ‘the microcosmic orbit’, (as taught by Mantak Chia, for example) moving and circulating energy. What I will describe though involves more than what is in that technique.

The second element I make use of is the mantra, Om Mani Peme Hung, and visualization and recollection of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Compassion. I’m aware that, as with all mantras, indeed with all spiritual practice, there’s an element of affinity that needs to be there for any method to work. I suggest this mantra though because of the universal availability of Avalokiteshvara, and his (or her) great compassionate nature. At the same time, this can of course be adapted and any Buddha or Bodhisattva, mantra

or divine figure one has a connection to can be used. The method would be essentially the same.

The method

We visualize our body as transparent, with a central channel going from the base of our spine to the crown of our head. We see and feel the energy moving forcefully up our central channel and out through the top of our head, where it breaks open what looks like a trap door on a hinge, and moves out powerfully up into the space above us.

We can use several visualizations to accomplish this movement of energy up the central channel. For example, we can see and feel it as being like a volcano, or like a rocket taking off, or as the central channel being like a chimney flue, with a strong updraft. We can feel the energy moving like it's going upwards through a high power hose, opening the top of our head and going up, like a geyser, or like a powerful beam of light, ten feet, a hundred feet, or more... a thousand feet up...

While we are doing this we can be reciting the mantra, Om Mani Peme Hung, and visualizing Avalokiteshvara and his Pure Land.

Another visualization can be of metal being pulled upwards and out the top of our head by a powerful magnet. Once you have the idea, you can make use of your own images, whatever works for you to move of energy up the central channel and out the top of your head.

Another feature here, in addition to moving the energy is the presence of the Buddha of Compassion, or any other divine figure you have a connection with. This is what brings deep peace and harmony, beyond it being purely a psycho-physical exercise. Avalokiteshvara represents for me the divine quality of love and compassion and wisdom we all have in us. It represents, for me, the best that is in us all - the boundless qualities of unconditional love and compassion, light and stable peace. His Pure Land too is made entirely of light, and is completely perfect and peaceful.

If you like, after this, you can imagine your body being filled by light from Avalokiteshvara, or from any divine form you choose.

This method is something that can be done whenever one feels even the slightest presence of desire in the body. In fact, the more it is done, the easier it becomes. This can be done while sitting, walking, or lying down. It can be done anywhere, at any time.

Without a doubt, channels are created through this practice that make it easier for the energy to flow in a particular way.

Endnotes:

I. As a male, I can only attest to the effectiveness of this method for the male body. It may work for women as well. Women have a different energy body, however, and if I were a female, I'd look for a woman teacher to explain how best to handle the energy of desire so that it's not a problem.

II. My own sense of it is that this technique would be best used as a support, or a provisional method, something we use on the way to a more lasting safety and peace, based on insight. It's value is that it can make more time and energy available for spiritual practice, at ease in one's body.

I trust the wisdom we each have in us, however, to make the best use of this, and any other method.

III. We can add to this: From The Nature of Desire

Desire in both men and women ideally has a purpose to it, that is not only to continue the human race, but to create loving homes, and to raise good men and women, and in that way to contribute to the collective life. This is taught in the Western Esoteric Tradition as the actual nature of desire in relationships, and how far that is from what we think of as simple allure and gratification!

This view adds something vital I think as well to the redistribution of energy throughout the body and then out into the world. When projected outwards in meditation, through visualization and prayer, and through works, the powerful fundamental energy we know also as desire is not just a generic, neutral force - it has a purpose to it, and is fulfilled when directed to accomplishing the needs and wishes of others, of our human race, and of all our life here.

We can send it out to do what is essentially done in other ways through building a home and raising a family. We can send it out to care for, to nurture and mature others, to protect and to provide for them all that they need, physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. We can care for others and for this whole world of ours as our very own family, the younger generation as our very own beloved children. We can do this through our thoughts, and words and actions, and with great generosity, praise, support and love.

Eastern and Western Traditions, I have found, both arrive at this understanding, lived practice, and fulfillment.

Part II. Essays on Wisdom

Dealing with Our Core Issue

“If you take care of your mind, you take care of the world.” - Joan Halifax

Unless we are a Buddha or high level bodhisattva, or an arhat, a fully liberated sage, we're still subject to suffering. It may be infrequent, or pacified for a time, but the cause remains as a potential in our mindstream. As ordinary people, we have not yet become free of what they identify in Buddhism as humanity's fundamental problem, which is the habit ego grasping, of taking ourselves and others and this world to be something mundane, and something other than what it is. This self-grasping ignorance is not an act of volition so much as a deeply ingrained tendency, going back countless lives.

Phrasing it this way, of course, perhaps sounds not so bad, like something we can take or leave, but the bold proposition in Buddhism is that it's the cause of our suffering, and that this can be ended through a practice of integrated insight.

For each person, suffering is unique, and it has a universal aspect to it as well. In psychology, they recognize that when we get close to the specific fundamental problem for a person, they react very strongly - with anger, or avoidance, or other forms of escape or denial. We need a host of positive elements coming together to even approach the root cause of our suffering, but as much as we long for happiness, health and peace, this is something we all need to do.

Until we get to the bottom of our core issue, even if it goes dormant for a while, it will continue to be a threat to our happiness and well being, and to all of our relationships.

A few examples of core issues would be insecurity, anger, fear, sadness, desire, addiction, paranoia, isolation, shame, or feelings of low self worth. These are like primary colors of the afflictions we experience. They are universal, and central to all the other negative experiences we have.

A person's core problem, we could say, is the nexus for all their other difficulties, and we can tell when we get close to it, or when something triggers it, because the reaction then is often one of fierce defensiveness.

There is real vulnerability at stake - a kind of primal danger felt by the person.

If we think in terms of more than one life, we would say that this cause of suffering is something we've had for lifetime after lifetime, too many to count. We don't feel capable of handling it when it begins to come up, and so we run to drugs or drink, sex, tv, the internet, shopping - anything to change the focus of attention away from this pain, and its attendant fear and oppressive sadness.

The language we use to ourselves to describe our core problem is something unique for us all. It may be that we seldom if ever articulate it to others, but we do have some way of thinking about it that is our own. We try to make sense of it, and in a deep way for us, both the problem and the way we think about it are linked to our self identity. This brings us right up to the universal element that Lama Yeshe called the problem of 'instinctual ego grasping', the contraction around some experience that we identify as a self. We were born with this, and it is at the root of our difficulties.

Even after seeing this mere idea of self is not who we ourselves and others are, the image, and the sense of it is persistent. As one teacher said, how could it be otherwise when it has been with us so long? It's only with insight practiced over time that we experience the gradual fading away of our mistaken view, and its subsequent effects.

It so seldom happens that we have a chance to look at our fundamental problem that when we *can* look at it and begin to deal with it, it's a remarkable opportunity, one not to be missed. So many things can get in the way, including our own unwillingness or inability to look deeply into what afflicts us.

Our suffering, as I said, may go dormant, even for a long time. We may even fool ourselves into thinking we are free from what caused us endless problems in the past, and yet if our central issue has not been resolved through deep understanding, there will be that potential for it to rise up again and destroy everything we've built up that has value and meaning to us.

The great 20th century Tibetan teacher, Kalu Rinpoche described the difference between merely pacifying suffering, and removing it altogether. He said it was like sand in a glass of water - the particles may settle, and the

water become clear. We may even think there's nothing left of what clouded the water before, but when you stir it up again, all the sand moves once more, for as long as it is still present. The other way to change the situation, he said, is to empty the glass, clean it out, and put the water back in. Then no matter who much it is stirred, there's nothing to be triggered, nothing left to cause it to become opaque again.

Another analogy they use in that Tradition is of a person practicing meditation in a mountain retreat. He or she may have a peaceful experience, and then even believe they've gotten free of their core problem and its attendant sufferings. What that person needs to do at that point, they say, is to come down off the mountain and see if there's anything left in them to get triggered. There are stories of people making it half way down the mountain only to meet some insult or attraction that tells them their work is not yet finished. If they are wise and fortunate in these stories, they turn around and go back up the mountain.

As lay people, we're not in retreat, so, what to do? We're not exempt from having a central problem or core issue to resolve, and as long as it's not taken care of, we're going to struggle. The best we can hope for is to set a motivation to make the time to deal with it more fully, for everyone's sake.

I remember a question I asked Thich Nhat Hanh on the first retreat I went on with him, in 1989. I asked, *is there any place in mindful living for blocking out pain?* He answered our group that, when things are difficult, we just do the best we can, but when our situation has calmed down a bit, and we have some peace and good circumstances again, that's the best time to practice. We should take full advantage of whatever good conditions we have to look deeply, to uproot the cause of suffering, and make our way to greater freedom.

It's clear to me that not resolving our core issue limits us personally, and interpersonally, in terms of what we are able to offer to others. If we understand our situation as I've outlined here, and have even just the seed of faith that mind made suffering *can* be brought to an end, then naturally we'll want to find the opportunity for deep, transformative spiritual practice.

Two other results can come from seeing this much about our own life - that we have a core issue to resolve, rooted in ignorance. First, we see that it is this way for all of us, and this brings *great compassion*. We see that just as it

has been for ourselves, they also have had this suffering - it's root cause and all it's effects - for what seems like countless lifetimes. How can this not awaken a deep compassion in us for ourselves and for all others?

Then, second, what they call *the bodhisattva vow* - the aspiration and actions taken to become enlightened ourselves in order to help others in the best possible way - becomes real. Whereas before it might have been somewhat of an abstraction, touching this truth about our own life, and seeing how it is this way also for those we care for makes it real.

We have to do all we can for each other. That much is fundamental to our nature. Without insight into causality however, those we know and care for and those we don't know personally are blind, staggering, making things worse for themselves by veiling the mind in hundreds of ways. Going on like that, how can confusion and sorrow ever end?

When we understand the connection between our own and others' fundamental problem, we find that naturally the feeling of responsibility arises. We have to do all we can to resolve our own core issue and free our mind so we can help others to do the same. We can only help others to the extent that we ourselves embody the remedy, that we ourselves are free.

And so,

May it be so
 May we all find our way to clear and deep understanding,
 and to the freedom and peace we all seek

Then, with insight and skill, may we help each other as much as we can

May we all have the conditions,
 and support and encouragement to fulfill our deepest needs and desires for
 wholeness, and healing,
 happiness, health and peace

By this deep understanding we develop,
 may all beings have happiness,
 By this, may problems and fears subside,
 and may they be removed permanently for us all

By this wisdom, may we all experience lasting peace,
health, happiness, and harmony with one another,
and may we offer this to our descendants,
for generations to come,
Even now,
may it be so

Temporal and Ultimate Benefit

In Buddhism, we speak of temporal and ultimate benefits we can have in this life and offer to others. When we pray as Buddhists, or as someone with an awareness of spiritual truths, this covers the full range of what we wish for ourselves and others to have.

Temporal benefits begin with what are called ‘the four requisites’, of food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. They then also include long life, good health and vitality, as well as freedom from fear, and the other negative emotions. When I think of the temporal kinds of happiness we can have here, I think also of the enjoyment of friendship, love and beauty. These are things we all need and naturally want for ourselves and others.

The ultimate benefits we can receive and give, by contrast, in Buddhism and in other religions as well, are the truths that those traditions teach us. When we receive a teaching and put it into practice and gain the result, we can say we have received the gift of that teaching.

Buddhism emphasizes in particular its wisdom teachings as the supreme gift that is offered, and that can be received through a person’s realization. The reason this considered an ultimate benefit is that in Buddhism and other religions, it is ignorance of truth or spiritual reality that is the cause of all our deprivation, discord, and dissatisfaction. Without wisdom, we may gain some short-lived possession, but as long as we are acting under the influence of greed, aggression and a fundamental misunderstanding of ourselves and others, whatever we have acquired will eventually fall away.

Buddhism and other traditions each in their own way teach cause and effect, and the fine temporary conditions we may have now are, at best, something we can use to develop more lasting freedom, happiness, health and peace. If we don’t see this, and instead lose ourselves in our temporary good fortune, we will have lost out on a great opportunity to find a more lasting safety, and a stable happiness and well being not dependent on conditions. Such is the ultimate benefit that we can all acquire, so religions tell us, and share with others.

When we wish for ourselves and others *may you enjoy every temporal and ultimate benefit*, it is a profound prayer, generous and far seeing. It

expresses the wish for health and safety, peace and enjoyment now and in the future, and for the best kinds of happiness and fulfillment.

From a letter- on wisdom and compassion

I just wanted to mention one thing you repeated in your short note- about what Goenka said about compassion developing naturally as a result of vipassana or insight- I think that, in all fairness, sometimes it happens like this, and sometimes not (otherwise all Arhats would be Bodhisattvas, and that's not yet the case).

Actually, this 'wisdom leading to compassion' is the approach in the Zen tradition, as well as in the Theravada, and also, to some extent, it is the approach taken by the lineages in Tibetan Buddhism that emphasize wisdom practice more first, on the way to a full, complete realization.

(Just a note here: The Tibetan word 'San-gye', 'Buddha', translates to 'completely purified- and fully developed', meaning that all faults have been removed (which is the cessation without remainder), and all positive qualities are brought forth, *actualized*.)

So, to get back to my point- if it is so that sometimes liberation, the freedom of mind, leads to the full development of love and compassion, and sometimes not, then why not? Why does it sometimes happen and sometimes not? This is so important for us to consider as individuals, and so important for our world, really.

And here's the best answer I can come up with so far- First, there are different temperaments, so that in any one system or approach one person will flourish fully, accomplishing all the different aspects of development, while another person may need other instruction, and to engage in other practices to achieve the same thing.

Then, I've found the following teaching very useful to explain what is happening in any case. In the Tibetan tradition, they speak of 'the two obscurations' that keep us from seeing the truth of what is here. The first type is what they call the 'conceptual obscurations', or the 'obscurations of conceptual thought' (wrong views). These are corrected, or cleared away by samatha and vipassana- the quieting of the mind and cultivation of the strength of discernment- discriminating between the true and the false.

The Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan traditions that practice non-conceptual meditation clear away this type of obscuration, the obscuration of conceptual thought, very effectively. But what happens, quite often as it turns out, - it's the characteristic possible sidetrack to this approach- is that the other type of obscuration, called 'the obscuration of afflictive emotions' (kilesa nivvana) is not always fully removed. Sometimes I've been calling these 'the qualitative obscurations'. And the all too common result is that people end up with a partial experience of the view of emptiness, or egolessness, one with the wrong concepts cleared away- but it is a cold, dark, meaningless, nihilistic experience, one that is lacking in the sense of worth, of the beauty and richness of what is here.

The emotional obscurations are cleared away by the development of all the qualities that we associate with the good heart: the development of love and compassion, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, humility, honesty, gratitude, joy, generosity... These change the quality of the mind so that when the conceptual obscurations are removed as well, the experience is warm; the mind is bright, appreciative, and loving; and the feeling is one of richness, of the great value of life.

The no-self teachings of the Buddha are further expressed in the Prajnaparamita Sutras, and the Middle Way is a further explanation of those teachings. The term 'Middle Way' refers to 'being free of the two extremes', the extreme of eternalism (ego-grasping), and the extreme of nihilism. According to Middle Way philosophy, all the mistakes that people can have regarding the View fall into one of these two categories.

Right View is accomplished by removing the two obscurations, conceptual and emotional, together with their seeds. So the development of love and the positive qualities of the heart are definitely an essential aspect of vipassana, or wisdom practice, seeing things fully as they actually are. Whether we arrive at this indirectly, or through our engaging in methods that directly cultivate both discernment and kindness, the need is there for everyone to have these elements present. That said, we should each practice what suits us best, and accomplishes a full result.

Metta and Wisdom

‘Rally the concepts for the highest purpose of developing wisdom, whereby concepts themselves are transcended.’ –

Venerable Nyananada

In Buddhism, the freedom from suffering, and the attainment of the highest happiness comes from the development of wisdom. So when we are practicing metta, loving kindness meditation, wishing ourselves or another well, it’s only natural that we have in mind for them this freedom of mind. In that sense, a person practicing a spiritual path will have a different and more refined, idea of the enjoyments and peace they would share.

In Buddhism, Wisdom needs to be understood in two ways: there’s the ordinary wisdom, that includes common sense, intelligence, memory and foresight. These are what we would call ‘worldly wisdom’. Then there is what is known as Transcendent Wisdom, which means seeing through, or going beyond the mistaken ego-idea we hold of ourselves and others.

Why is this so important to know? All the afflictive emotions come from this ignorance: all the anger, fear, attachment, jealousy, pride, competitiveness, and so on.

Usually, when we’re in the grip of a strong emotion, unless we’re trained, or quick enough to catch what’s going on, we don’t see the ego-idea. Then, when things calm down a bit, we don’t feel any urgency to look deeply into this. And so it goes, on and on...

If we learn to look, however, we can see the presence of ego grasping, right in the middle of the arising of a delusion, such as anger, or attachment, pride, or low self esteem.

This idea of ourselves or another that we take hold of seems to be of a single nature, separate from others, and permanent. That is illusory, the source of our problems.

The way Lama Zopa Rinpoche expresses it, that I that appears to exist from its own side, not merely labelled by the mind, doesn't exist at all. See for yourself if this is so.

There's a Taoist story of a man in his small boat who sees another boat slowly coming towards him. He calls out, trying to warn the person in the other boat that he's headed right for his boat, but no one seems to hear. He shouts louder, and starts to cuss, and when the other small boat finally rams into his, he's outraged – ready to give the other boatman a piece of his mind... when... he sees there was no one in the other boat... and, just like that, his anger vanishes...

It's like this when we realize that the one we would get angry at is only our imagined idea of a person, or situation.

So much of what we do with our mind, in relation to others, is our own invention.

What can we do?

There's a line from the Seven Point Mind Training teaching that translates to, *'Wisdom is the greatest protection'*.

Of course, we can separate from negative actions and states of mind by ethical restraint – which quite literally can feel like we're holding ourselves back from doing something we want to do, for example, like eating that cake, or speaking that harsh word;

and we can learn to pacify negative emotions through calming the mind in meditation, but this is also temporary – like Chagdud Tulku said, like pressing 'pause' on the tape player;

but it's only wisdom that ultimately uproots the cause of suffering.

The teachings say that this ego idea has been with us since beginningless time, but that it can be transcended, and suffering brought to an end, through the development of right understanding.

The Thai teacher, Ajaan Thate said, 'Mental phenomena will stop only when insight discerns its causal factors, and uproots their underlying causes.'

Now, this freedom from problems, and the attainment of the highest happiness is naturally what all wish for ourselves, and those we care for, and so, of course the question, or sticking point presents itself:

how can we wish happiness for ourselves or another if they don't exist as we imagine?

When this question comes up, it's something of a landmark, I think. It means we're trying to integrate these two aspects of the path, of love and wisdom, and something doesn't seem to fit. But this only means that we haven't yet taken the wisdom side far enough.

I'm sure other students besides myself have been relieved to find that there's a whole great body of teachings called The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras are aimed at explaining this very point.

Being one of the earliest formulations of the Mahayana Teachings, they emphasize the ideal of compassion throughout this sacred literature, and, at the same time, they thoroughly explain the 'emptiness', or non-existence, of that imagined self that we reflexively produce, and project and hold onto as though it is what is actually there.

The Prajna Paramita Sutras help us to see through this notion, and learn to care for others in the best possible way.

Here are a few verses from the Perfection of Wisdom:

'If you see the signless nature of the sign, then you see the tathagata (that which is).'

'The skill in means of a Bodhisattva
consists in this,
that he cognizes a sign,
(or what seems to be a fixed characteristic,
that could be mistakenly equated with identity)
both its mark and cause,
and yet he surrenders himself completely
to the Signless realm of dharma,
in which no sign has ever arisen.'

and,

‘one treats an actually non-existent objective support as a sign,
as an objective support.

The act of will (of a bodhisattva, in truth, actually) arises only in reference
to the conventional expressions
current in the world.’

In case this seems in the least bit abstract, there are the later teachings on
wisdom in Buddhism, that can help to clarify the meaning.

What our senses and concepts present to us, and what we then fixate on, is
not what is actually there. We can learn to see through our imaginings, and
in fact, out of compassion, this is something we need to learn to do.

This same thread of an idea, of acting with both wisdom and compassion is
presented by the Eighth century saint, Shantideva, in his Guide to the
Bodhisattva’s Way of Life, where he asks,

‘If no beings exist [in ultimate reality], toward whom should we have
compassion?’

and he answers:

‘To attain the result [of buddhahood, which is to be achieved only
through the awakening of great compassion], one should direct one’s
compassion toward whatever it is that unenlightened beings call ‘beings’.

The modern day Tibetan teacher, Deshung Rinpoche, also taught on this
same subject, when he said:

‘On the conventional level of reality, beings do not exist as they are
perceived by other unenlightened beings. The bodhisattva realizes that, in
ultimate reality, there are no beings who exist as unenlightened beings think,
but he directs his mind toward those beings as they perceive themselves.

‘On the ultimate level, he sees no beings, but he realizes that on the
conventional level, beings think they exist and do experience suffering. Out

of objectless compassion, therefore, he directs his mind toward them.’

Going back to the historical Buddha, in the last part of the Metta Sutta, there are the lines:

‘having attained Right Understanding,
one is no longer born into states of suffering’

I take the inclusion of this idea at the end of his teaching on loving kindness to be an encouragement to us all, to get to the root causes of our dissatisfaction, and difficult emotions, and then to share this wisdom with all our loved ones, with all the world.

One more piece, for completeness’ sake

Going beyond the ego idea we’ve held of ourselves doesn’t lead to nothing, or non-existence, but to our true self, sometimes called our Buddha Nature, which is inherently perfect, and naturally rich with good qualities, such as love, intelligence, joy, and peace.

The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras say that all the Perfections are included in Wisdom, such as Generosity, and Ethics.

And later schools say that

the nature of mind is intrinsically pure,
and only temporarily veiled
by obscurations

when these are cleared away,
our original nature shines forth,
just as the sun,
that has been parted from the clouds

Metta leads to wisdom, wisdom leads to great love

One teacher, I’ve heard, referred to Maha Metta – or Great Love, and we can come to this in a number of ways. One is through the development of what are called The Four Immeasurables, of Universal Love, Compassion, Joy, and the Steady Impartiality of Love, or the Stable Equality of View.

Though the wisdom aspect is not explicitly brought out in the loving kindness teachings alone, I think it is implied, or can be intuited. As one teacher in San Francisco, Lama Lodro Rinpoche explained, having great love brings one right up to the view itself.

Another way to arrive at the unity of Great Love and Wisdom understanding selflessness, as explained, is through the cultivation of liberating insight. By this, we arrive at the state of freedom, peace, and Great Love for all.

Wherever we are in our study and practice of the path, whatever our afflictions and needs at this time, we do need both of these factors, to some extent at least, for any path to function.

We need kindness towards ourselves, manifesting as self respect, and the wish to live well, and as ethics, if we are pursuing a path that leads to greater peace and freedom. We also need insight into causality, if we are to practice well, and actualize our intention. Ideally, we'll bring each factor to its fullest development, and share the fruits of our practice with all the world.

I praise the Buddha, and all Enlightened Teachers, for their great liberating activity.

From ordinary perception to sacred outlook

How will we respond
to the news from New York,
and from Missouri?
from Florida, from Oakland?
How can I turn these tears and this anger
into something more,
into a road we can walk together?
I am wishing all my family
the roots of peace and well being

*“Let me show you one corner
of the beauty that cannot be spoken...”*

- Rumi

So much of our pessimism and despair comes from the limited views we that hold of ourselves and this world that we live in. The following is a sketch of how de-valued, common perceptions of ourselves, and others, and our world develop, and how they can be undone. Like any sketch, it leaves out many things, but hopes to catch enough of the essential structure of what’s going on to communicate its message.

We live in a culture and a time that is lacking in its sense of the sacred. Wherever the best of human values are not given enough attention, or where religious culture is mocked or ignored, and where a sense of the beautiful is overridden by the volume and quantity of meaningless things, we become inwardly impoverished.

We live in grossly materialistic times, that deny of the existence of everything beyond the reach of our ordinary five senses. Be assured, this has not always been the case in other times and cultures. We may pride ourselves on having gotten over what we haughtily call ‘infantile’ views, of a spiritual world, or any higher order than what the average person can see. We denigrate ‘magical thinking’ as naïve, uneducated, false and misleading. We’re so proud of our reasoning and science, and we set that as the standard for everything.

Modern consumer culture then isolates people, and over time, the human connections we all need grow thin. We become suspicious of our neighbors and friends, and set apart from family. The prevalent perspective is actually nihilistic, life denying, a tragic distortion of who and what we are.

The views many of us have inherited, just by the fact of having been born here, are then reinforced by our emotional reactions, which are then reflected back to us as appearances that are colored or tainted by our own minds. If our mind is not dealt with skillfully, a patina can cover everything. What all this adds up to is a disempowered view of what it is to be alive, to be a human being in this precious world of ours. Collective views are shared in mostly unnoticed ways. They are pervasive, and are the ground of our sense of the choices we have, for change or development, or to remedy the problems we face.

To counteract this perception, or rather, misperception, we should be able to recognize diminished values, and degraded views wherever they exist, in ourselves, our family and neighbors, and in the world, so that we can replace them with something truer, something ever closer to the ideal.

At the very least, our religions traditions and philosophies should offer us an alternative to nihilism. Life is available, and someone should say it out loud.

To love is to begin to remember who we are

What is it that brings light back into our lives? What will cause us to see ourselves and our world as it really is? Where will we find strength for all we need to do, and vision, and with grace? Everyone, no matter whether they are affiliated with a tradition or not, can love. It can be a love for family, for art, for nature, for our teachers, for our young...

Love is the eye that sees beauty. In that one virtue there is light, and strength. There is daily food for the journey, courage, and healing. We can add to this affection for our world a basic practice of meditation that quiets and clarifies the mind. Together, these two can enhance and deepen each other. We struggle more than we need to, when we do everything *but* our inner work. That, we give short shrift. But this is that 'one needful thing'.

With love, and regularly taking time for meditation and self cultivation, as a basis, and a way of life, we can begin to appreciate what Traditions offer, their great gift to us all.

In Tibetan Buddhism, basic ignorance manifests as what they call ‘impure perception’, or ‘ordinary perception’, or the mundane view of the world that we carry with us, and this is seen as the root cause of how we limit ourselves and suffer.

The opposite of this is called an enlightened view, pure perception, or sacred outlook. This is a way of experiencing the world as essentially divine in nature, having great beauty and potential. We see that every life is precious.

The following principles go beyond Buddhism alone, to reflect something of what is seen and lived with in other Traditions as well, and in the lives of contemplatives. They stand in radical contrast and in eternal opposition to the common, mundane view.

Here are few tenets of a magical world view, pure perception or sacred outlook:

that all life is sacred;

that the Divine, freedom and peace, the Kingdom of Heaven, is within us all

that our fundamental nature is pure

and that therefore, that we all have the potential to become free from suffering and attain happiness; we can accomplish great benefit for ourselves and others

that this world is sacred, alive and responsive, and that we are inseparably connected to it;

that we are always connected to each other, to our whole family...

An enlightened world view, however we come to it, offers us spiritual food, expansive vistas, and the means to accomplish our aims; it offers us solace and support, whenever and wherever it is needed most.

I find such views closer to the truth of how things are. Whatever methods we then use, there is a workable operating basis for living, full and rich. We are empowered by such views, and the heritage of our great resources is again, as ever, open to us.

From an enlightened perspective of this kind, the spiritual practices we do, such as study, meditation or prayer, aim to clear away what keeps us from knowing the truth about ourselves, and our lives here; the fullness of the gifts our teachers and benefactors have given to us, and what we have to draw from to act, to set things right as much as we can here in this world.

May we all be aware of our true heritage,
and live lives of generosity,
great joy, and fulfillment,
of great peace, well being,
and benefit to all!

Question: What is the relationship between shunyata (the wisdom perceiving emptiness) and compassion?

The Dalai Lama: The idea of shunyata, I think, brings the aim, the possibility of the cessation of suffering, so that is an immense help for compassion, because compassion is a desire to get rid of the suffering of other beings. So once you see the possibility of the cessation of suffering, your concern for their suffering becomes something realistic, otherwise it's just wishful thinking. So that's the connection.

When you see someone as a mystery, you are seeing them for the first time.
– Marilyn Robinson

*“If the doors to perception were cleansed,
all things would appear as they are,
infinite.”*

- William Blake

All life is sacred

In what follows, it may be helpful to consider the following: at their best, what is explicit in the Middle Way is implicit in the Nature of Mind teachings, and what is made experientially clear through the non-conceptual approach to Wisdom is also there as a result in the Middle Way.

The Root Cause of Suffering

{I hope in the world today, and every day, people are writing articles like the one I am about to write. This is the most important subject of all.}

The root cause of suffering in our life, and in the world, is a specific type of ignorance, and this ignorance can be removed. Freedom from suffering is possible.

I could reference this as a Buddhist teaching, but I thought it better to frame it this way, putting that statement up front, because it often gets lost in so much that is other than this one essential point: that our suffering has a cause that can be ended.

Some of what is ‘other’ in teachings are necessary adjuncts, such as ethics and meditation, supportive conditions for developing wisdom, and some is what has been accumulated, that has little or nothing to do with this essential subject. So let’s cut to the chase.

What is the exact nature of this ignorance that we can become free from, and end suffering? It has two important aspects that should be pointed out from the very beginning of this study:

The first is that *we create an idea of ourselves, and others, and the world, and we grasp onto that*. This causes all the afflictive emotions, of anger, greed, pride, jealousy, fear, sadness, and so on.

The second thing to notice right off follows on the first, and should be said explicitly, for the sake of bringing it right to where we sit now, and that is that *this self-grasping is going on all the time*. It is ingrained, habitual, and reflexive, a constant feature of the mind of every untrained person. This is not something we intentionally, consciously plan to do. Self grasping ignorance is unconscious, and ongoing, until ended.

Secondary effects and primary causes

We all live in the domain of our emotional life. For this reason, if we look at what makes up our experience, we will see the quality of it, as it is now.

We take this to be just the way it is, or has been, without the contribution of how we have used our mind.

All our emotions color the mind. They either clarify and brighten our life, or they obscure it. What we call the positive emotions make the mind clear and true, while the afflictive emotions cloud the mind. Out of negative emotions, we then act, and react, and perpetuate suffering.

In actuality, what we are knowing when we look at emotions, and see and feel their effect, is directly related to, and *follows after* ego grasping. Sometimes these two – self grasping ignorance and the afflictive emotions in fact are talked about together, to highlight this truth. We usually won't see this when we're experiencing strong emotions, but it's there.

Although this ego grasping comes first, when it comes to our everyday experience, for all of us, it's the emotional quality of our life that is most apparent, right here and now. For this reason, it's taught that our mind can be engaged right where we are, and brightened, by such things as joy and gratitude, by appreciating beauty, and by cultivating such qualities as patience, optimism, courage, and loving kindness.

In this way, it can be made more malleable, and able to settle comfortably, so it can be worked with further, on the deeper, more causative levels of our experience.

*'Mental afflictions do not exist in sense objects,
nor in the sense faculties,
nor in the space between,
nor anywhere else.
Where then do they exist
and agitate the whole world?
This is an illusion only.
Liberate your fearing heart
and cultivate perseverance
for the sake of wisdom.'*

- From 'A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, by Shantideva

When we say that something is the root cause of an event, or sequence of events, it means, plainly, that removing this primary cause, the secondary effects are all automatically removed as well.

‘Cut the root of a tree,
and the branches fall’.

Can this hypothesis be proven? Absolutely. It can, and has been proven by a great many people throughout time, by many thousands of people. Of course, having had a glimpse, and getting the full result are very different. The essential insight can be of the same nature, but the degree of realization is different, so one person continues to suffer, another has their afflictions lessen, and a third becomes completely free of suffering.

There can never be any progress in the contemplative life, or towards emancipation if there is not a cultivated self awareness. So many people lead dissipated lives, overwhelmed, scattered, fatigued, or just going from one uncontrolled emotional extreme to another – fear, despair, anger, restlessness, and so on.

Now look at every contemplative tradition – people there are always finding quiet places, and making efforts to free up their time and energy to study, to reflect, and to go deeply into things. Without this, we, all of us, just stay on the surface, and, at best, are only able to form an intellectual understanding of how things are. This may prove useful later, but ultimately it’s no substitute for knowing for ourselves the experiences that teachers and traditions are pointing to.

The specific ignorance that is the root cause of suffering is ego-grasping. Seeing clearly that *the ego does not exist as we imagine* is called seeing the ‘emptiness’ or non-existence of the false self. For example, it’s like when we superimpose the idea of a man onto a scarecrow – no ‘man’ is there at all. In the same way, ignorance habitually projects onto our experience a sense of self that can be *seen through* when we look at it with strong, penetrative discriminating awareness

This idea of self that we create and reflexively project onto experience is sometimes in teachings called the *gak-cha*, the refuting object. This is what we have to learn to see, and see through. By understanding it thoroughly, we

can uproot that specific mistaken consciousness, *avidya*, the cause of suffering.

It is essential that we recognize this as clearly as possible, so we don't miss the mark in our cultivation of the insight that liberates. We need to be careful at this point, so that we don't stray into nihilism, or into a mere space-like experience in our meditations, and so, in what follows, I'll go into three things:

1. exactly what the refuting object is;
 2. how we can tell when we've found it,
- and,
3. what we should do when we have recognized and seen through it.

First of all, reflexively, habitually, without being told, we take *an idea* to be ourself. This idea has distinct, predictable characteristics for all of us, no matter who we are:

- of being a separate self;
- of being unitary – that is, seeming to be of a single nature;
- of being independent of causes and conditions; perceived as distinct from the elements or experience it's labeled upon;
- and of being permanent – we hold onto the idea, for example, of ourselves as being somehow the same person when we were ten, as we are now, as adults.

We must look for where this self is – is it our body?, if so, which part?..., our feelings?, our thoughts?, habits?, history?

When we do this thoroughly, we can begin to see that *what we conceive ourselves to be* is just that – *an idea, a thought*. This is called 'the merely labeled I'. It is nothing more than that.

The opposite of seeing some thing as merely labeled is when we see something that appears as ‘existing from its own side’ – independent of our thinking.

This ‘I’ refers to something that does not actually exist as we believe it does when we don’t investigate. It is illusory – having been conjured up by our own mind. We have created the fixed idea of self that corresponds to no real fact at all about us. See for yourself if this is true or not.

The self is a convention, useful for communicating with others, but that’s as far as it goes. The names we take hold of are like the door to a house, or the gate to a city – if we want to know something or someone, we need to go through the door.

A couple of classic examples, and one recent experience to make what is to be seen as clear as possible

- When we’re walking on ‘the road’ – where is ‘the road’? Look for it! What is ‘road?’ – It is a label we make up and project onto rocks, concrete, dirt, or whatever, that, by themselves, are not road, but taken together, we call ‘road’.

- or, when we are walking on the beach, where, exactly, is ‘beach’? It, too, is a name we give to many parts that we don’t label as beach (sand, ocean, rocks, and so on)

This is not to say that ‘beach’ doesn’t exist – but, and this is the important point here - it exists differently from what we habitually, reflexively believe when we don’t investigate and see through all our projections.

A recent example

About a year ago, I was feeling too lazy to make soup, and so I jokingly told myself, ‘I’m not going to make soup – I’m just going to cut the onions’. I had to laugh because I had been studying and reflecting on these very Middle Way teachings, that I’m trying to put here in everyday language, and I knew that this ‘making soup’ was just an idea, made of other parts – actions – none of which, by themselves, were ‘making soup’.

‘Making soup’ is a label, and idea. I saw through that, and the effect of *the idea* of ‘making soup’ became clear to me. It felt like a burden, but, when seen through, not so! The mind is so powerful – the originator of all this suffering, or freedom.

Now, unless analysis like these, or on a traditional object, such as a table, starts to become abstract, and removed from what really matters

It is vital to point out, and for us all to remember that these teachings are meant to point to the very cause of all our untold suffering, and, when properly used, they can lead, not only to our own freedom, but, even more importantly, to our becoming able to help all others to become free of the entirety of their suffering as well.

Any time wisdom starts to feel even the least bit abstract, we need to remind ourselves of this fact, because we need a sustained intensity of inquiry, and dedication, to see these things through, to continue learning, and to get the full benefit.

Right here is where we need to have real compassion for ourselves, for our untold suffering, and great compassion for all those who suffer as we have, and might yet still, if wisdom is not revealed to them, and if they are not incited to take it up, to study it, and to achieve its result, which is liberation and enlightenment.

Talking about and recognizing the processes that take place in our own mind is a first step. Then, we can gain certainty that we’re on the right path to freeing our mind.

How to tell if we’ve found the view that is to be overcome by study and practice

When we recognize the disparity between the ideas we hold, and what is seen on investigation, then we have ‘found’ our own mistaken perception, the cause of suffering. What we must do then is *see through* our imaginings, our projections, and learn to not be deceived by them *in the least*.

This can be compared to not being fooled at all by our dream-projections, of a tiger, for example. Seeing it as a dream, fear fades, emotion fades. It had its root in the mistaken idea that what was seen was real, in the way it

appeared. When we wake up to what is going on, and the root cause fades, so does the consequent feeling.

As wisdom increases, the sense of appearances *as anything other* than conventions diminishes. With right practice and time, ego grasping and all its effects fade. Relative appearances still arise for a realized person, of course, but they are *not caught* by them. They don't take them to be anything more than what they are. This is the decisive point. This is what makes all the difference.

Seeing through self grasping does not lead to nothingness

We can see that the fixed idea of self we had does not exist now, did not exist in the past, and will not in the future exist as we imagine. The same is can be said of tables, beaches, dwellings, a process, and so on.

When we cut through our projections in this way, what is revealed is our deeper nature, and all those perfect and pure qualities we inherently possess – the compassion, generosity, patience, wisdom, joy and peace of our true nature. This is the life we live now. So Wisdom accomplishes more than just the cessation of wrong views, and suffering. Great as that is, that's only one side of it. It leads also to recognizing interdependence, with true values, impermanence, and related-ness with others, our family through time. All these are known when we get past our thought up history and fabricated personality.

*'Your pure vision is like an eye –
when your pride or critical thoughts do not blind it,
all beings are mines of noble qualities
Train in universal, pure vision,
I beseech you'*

- Bokar Rinpoche

Before, ego grasping and the afflictions blocked the light. Now, we can see, and cultivate the awareness of what actually is the case with every one of us.

*Our original nature is perfect and pure.
And although this has been covered
by temporary delusions,*

these can be removed.

*Practice then reveals
our innate freedom,
and fundamental goodness.*

*Pure and bright,
it is naturally a state
of health and happiness,
peace, and joy.*

We should each learn to carefully watch the evolution of our experiences of happiness or suffering. When happiness is based on an ego idea, it is clung to tightly, and it changes. When, on the other hand, the experience of freedom or peace arises because of seeing through illusion, to something real and lasting about ourselves, it's of a different nature. This inner freedom, our true home, can't really be lost – only forgotten about, or covered over by conceptual thinking, or an obscured mind.

It takes so much in a person's life to get to the point of even starting to ask questions about the nature of experience, that we should feel very fortunate if we are at this point. We should recognize it as a rare thing in this world, and in our life. We should rejoice, and do as much as we can to take advantage of this precious opportunity.

Most religious tradition's teachings are about creating the right conditions so that we can study, learn to understand ourselves, and begin to unravel the casual process that leads us to all our unwanted suffering. The danger of this is that the essential points can get lost, or can seem to be equal in importance to every other part of the teachings, when this is not the case. Always, wisdom is the main thing.

‘All the divisions of the teachings
were given for the sake of wisdom’.

I could have quoted scriptures and liberally cited sources, and written a historically supported article, but I thought it would be more important, for once, to just lay out the bare facts – these essential points that should be kept in mind and worked with, until we are all as free as we please.

May all attain the most perfect state
of freedom and peace,
and may there be joy everywhere

Beyond these introductory ideas, to those who are looking for liberation, I would strongly encourage: the cultivation, as much as possible, of calm and clear meditation (called ‘shin-nay’ – also spelled ‘shine’, or ‘shamatha’). This is so we can get the most out of these practices; and then, either the study of the Middle Way, Mahamudra or Dzogchen teachings from the Tibetan Tradition; the Wisdom sections of teachings in the Theravada; (the book ‘The Island’, edited by Ajahn Passano and Ajahn Amaro, and available for free on the Abhayagiri website, is a treasure here) the wisdom teachings found in the Zen Tradition; or the teachings of the Noble Thich Nhat Hanh, or other teachers, on the Heart Sutra or Diamond Sutra; one, or more of these, whatever one has an affinity with, and finds effective.

On abuddhistlibrary.com, there is an [‘introductions’ page](#), and on that page, there is a section on Wisdom, with links to articles introducing various approaches to this most important subject.

One of these articles is by my teacher, Lama Yeshe, and is called ‘Searching for the Causes of Unhappiness’, and this is an excellent teaching. I also have a page on that same website called [‘things I like to share’](#) that has a few more resources for this study. One called [‘Wisdom Teachings by Lama Zopa Rinpoche’](#) (which are Middle Way teachings) is linked to via this page, and is highly recommended.

May we all receive
what the Buddhas and Noble Ones intend,

and,

May all be well,
and at their ease

Buddhist Wisdom Teachings on the Theme of Conceit

The word ‘conceit’ has a range of practical definitions in Buddhism. It covers everything from the common emotion we are familiar with, all the way to our subtle self concept. The way it’s defined points the way to greater freedom.

Conceit is recognized, first, in the way we usually think of it, as pride and looking down on others, holding an inflated sense of self importance. It is in the additional meanings of conceit, however, that we find the wisdom aspect: conceit is also explained as *the idea we hold of ourselves* as better than, worse than, or equal to others.

As in the other presentations of wisdom teachings, it’s said that we don’t so much create our self-idea with a moment to moment act of volition, but that we carry it with us, habitually. We then react to circumstances out of that thought up sense of self.

It’s interesting that we have this secondary meaning of conceit in the English language as well, as an underlying idea that is accepted, or taken for granted.

There are many ways to get to the same point, of looking at the idea of ourself that we hold, and this teaching on conceit is one of them. It points out how we can find the sense of self we have constructed and that we maintain. Whenever we think or feel, I am better, I am worse than, or I am equal to, the underlying assumption is of a self. That self, when we examine it, seems to be of a single nature, separate from others, and permanent. There is clearly more to us than any of our ego-ideas can encompass, and this is exactly where insight can transform our experience.

The traditional teaching that nothing should be grasped at as I or mine, “He looks, this is not me, this is not mine...” was not meant to be used merely as an affirmation. To just repeat words would be almost useless. What is essential instead is to see for ourselves just how far our ordinary ideas are from who and what we actually are, in our fullness. Then the emotions accompanying pride, or self denigration lessen and vanish from our experience.

When we think of a conceited person, we can see the fragile ego that can't stand even the slightest criticism. It's not really a pleasant state, though a person can get stuck there for a long time. It seems to go with reaching a pinnacle of success. Some few become accomplished and stay humble, but even humility has a shadow, if we are not careful. That too is an insecure state. We are still grasping at an ego-idea as who we are, and the not-self teachings warn us that as long as we identify with *any concept* we are caught. We will miss the boundless wonder of our being here, and all our relatedness in this very moment.

As with other wisdom teachings, the ideas on the subject of conceit are offered as encouragement to see for ourselves how things actually are, as compared to how we imagine them to be. Our conceits are a subtle phenomena, and so we need meditation, time, energy and enthusiasm to see into them and get that much more freedom as a result.

Sometimes, when we suddenly become aware that we are holding physical tension, we automatically let go and feel relief. In the same way, when we are aware of how we are holding some idea of ourselves that doesn't match the reality we find in contemplation, in that instant the idea can dissolve and we can experience the relief of greater inner freedom. In the Great Perfection teachings they say, "In the moment of seeing, there is liberation." We know right then and there that we are more than any idea we can ever have.

When mistaken concepts are more deeply imprinted, of course, it takes clear seeing, and more time and energy to transform them, and their emotional effects, but even our most subtle and persistent fabricated concepts can be seen through, or understood as such, and our experience can open up.

All the different wisdom teachings in Buddhism have this one purpose of leading people out of suffering. We suffer because of the limiting ideas we impose on ourselves and others and this world. The teachings on the different meanings of conceit, and particularly as it being the underlying assumptions of self we reflexively hold, point the way to greater freedom

I recall one teaching that says,

Jealous of superiors,
arrogant towards inferiors,

competitive with equals –
for an ego-centric person,
there is never any contentment

The fabric of our lives here is woven from our regard for one another. For this reason we have abundant opportunities in our daily lives to find the feeling of conceit. More importantly, we can see through the ego idea that underlies such evaluation. The basis for all this comparing and judging can then dissolve, and while the relative truths remain, the depth and fullness of our lives here can also be known. This removes pride and aggression, self denigration and undervaluing others as well. We can begin to value one another rightly, and to live from that understanding.

The teachings are a welcoming door, and it remains only for us to reflect on them, awaken to what they are saying, and step into freedom.

The two continua

We can speak of our experience as having two aspects.

The first is an imagined continuum, with its history, with who we habitually identify ourselves or others to be, with karma, with emotional reactions to things, people and events, and with the wish to avoid suffering and to know happiness. For someone on a spiritual path, this last motivation is one of wishing to know freedom.

The second aspect of what we can know is that of an unchanging continuum of experience, in that it is with us all the time. This, however, is only known by those who look for it, and train themselves to see it.

Here, I'll describe the two.

The imagined continuum

{This next part I heard myself telling another in a dream, on the morning of March 30th, 2013}

I can explain emptiness, in the Buddhist sense, to you.

Imagine the core of what is first a planting, and then a tree. All the subsequent trunk, branches, and leaves depend on it, right? Without that core, all the branches fall away.

Ego grasping is like the core of a tree. It is the source of all the afflictive emotions. Without ego grasping, all the negative emotions fall away.

When we compare how we usually hold ourselves and others to be, with what we find on investigation, we see the emptiness, or the non-existence of that self, that ego.

Ego grasping is not something that is volitionally done, it has been with us from beginningless time.

Not seeing this emptiness is a misidentification with what is not.

Using an organic metaphor like this is accurate too in another way. We have created in the past this sense of self that doesn't exist as we believe, with all its history, habits, preferences and emotional reactions to things. Though coming about as a result of something we imagined, there is a continuity there, undeniably. The effects continue as our experience.

Even after having had a glimpse of ourselves as we more truly are, these effects remain for a time, but if they not renewed by our picking up and reinforcing and adding to wrong views, and what's more, if we practice seeing through those views, the habit of self grasping as well as its effects all gradually fade away. In the mean time, we have these empty effects, from our previous life. They are like the trunk, branches and leaves that are now without any core – they are in the process of falling away.

All this is part of the experience of the conditioned, imagined continuum. Even though it is real in a sense, it is the product, or the result of something we've thought up. At all times, there is no self as we conceive of it, in any of this. This is something we all can and should see for ourselves.

*The bodhisattva has the concentrated insight,
not grasping any dharma by name,
vast, noble, unlimited and steady...*

- from The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines

I pay homage to my teachers,
freed, well freed in their hearts,
accomplished in knowledge and conduct

The stages the Pali Suttas describe, as Stream Enterer, Once Returner, Never Returner, and Arhant, refer to degrees of karmic momentum left in the (selfless) imagined continuum. They refer to what is remaining until total release, without remainder, to 'the disbanding of stress'. May we all accomplish that!

The unchanging continuum

When we speak of experience, most of us know only that changing, conditioned, often afflicted sense of self – that which has a specific history, feels limitations and revolves around that we have taken ourselves to be. There is also another kind of experience available to us, that puts everything into a different light.

We also all have what I'll call here 'an unchanging continuum'. When this is talked about at all, it's usually taking as its reference point what we know and most familiar with, and saying, it is not that, or, it is other than that. So, for example, the unchanging continuum is described as the unconditioned, 'the unaffected', and as not what we have taken ourselves to be.

In a treatise by Maitreya, written down by the Tibetan teacher Asanga 'The changeless nature', is also called 'the peerless continuum' or 'Buddha Nature'. It refers to something we all have with us, all the time, but that is always unknown in ordinary people.

They describe a number of advantages to knowing this level of our experience for ourselves. For one, it removes any doubt we may have had about our capacity to solve our problems, and to get free from suffering. This inner freedom of ours is something innate, and with us all the time. It is the clear light nature of mind, the Dharma-kaya, 'the body of truth'. No matter what, this is immutable, and indestructible.

Second, knowing this for ourselves removes any pride. When we see that this potential is innate in all others, we can't possibly put ourselves over anyone else, anywhere, at any time, either in our thinking, or speaking or acting. And third, and based on these two, we see how much suffering has been and continues to be unnecessarily generated, through ignorance, and then through all the afflictive emotions, of greed, anger, jealousy, and so on.

When we see this, it naturally leads to compassion, and to the determination to clarify this realization for ourselves, and to bring all others to this same level of freedom.

Another take on the same history

We can see the same events as before, only now, we see *through* them as well, in that we don't take them in the same way as we once did (with limited selves interacting with the other limited selves we conceived of – without the fixation on what was only what was apparent, what was only our dependently arisen view). This makes all the difference, both in the interpretation of events, as well as in terms of where we should go from here.

A brief overview of the development of Buddhist Wisdom teachings

When the Buddha taught annatta – no self, he did so to help free those he was speaking with from their misapprehension of a self where there is no self, never has been, and never will be. The 'self' of ourselves, of others, and of objects in this world, is an invention, a fabrication, a complete fiction. Sometimes the wisdom teachings of the Buddha are referred to as having been given in 'the first turning of the wheel'.

That the teachings worked for many of the men and women in the first centuries after the historical Buddha taught, shows itself in the spread not only of the teachings geographically, but also in terms of how they were expressed. Sometimes the emphasis was placed on one part of the teachings, and sometimes new language was used to express those very same original ideas, to correct common mistakes, to make it easier to understand the Buddha's intent, and to experience the results of practice.

A common mistake on hearing the no self teachings was to take them as being nihilistic, and so, as expedient means, first the Prajnaparamita, or Perfection of Wisdom Sutras, and then the Middle Way school developed. These are referred to as being part of the second turning of the wheel.

They had (and have) the aim of delineating the wisdom teachings of the Buddha more clearly, so that both the errors of self grasping and of falling into the belief that nothing exists or matters could be corrected. The Prajnaparamita also emphasizes the importance of compassion, and the dedication to the well being of all that lives.

Then, what this moving beyond ego grasping makes abundantly clear is that we are more than we ever thought we were, and that others have a greater depth and potential than we ever realized they had. This brings us to the third turning of the wheel, in regards to the wisdom teachings.

One interesting approach was taken by Gampopa, in *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*. In his chapter on wisdom, he first says we need to remove the mistaken idea that things exist the way we've always believed. Then he goes on to say that we next have to remove the mistaken idea that nothing exists. What does exist is this peerless continuum, which is unalloyed freedom, permanence, and peace; it is unborn, not subject to aging, or cessation; it is the source of all qualities.

The *Treatise on Buddha Nature* says,

*there is nothing to be removed from this,
and there is nothing we need to add*

It is complete, just as it is, vast and pure, clear and bright, naturally awake, and inherently joyful; it has never been subject to affliction, to birth and death, to confusion or painful emotions; it is without limitations, inherently perfect.

This is there in the Theravada. It is the basis for the Mahamudra and Dzogchen teachings in Tibetan Buddhism, and in a sense, for Zen as well. It is their starting point, and the full realization of this original nature is their aim. This is also the basis for the Vajrayana teachings and practice.

Some have objected that this is reifying what is not self and turning it into a self. Those who practice in accord with the Third Turning acknowledge this, but they say that the greater error would be not to recognize these inherent qualities and potentials.

This is actually the very basis for all, for either samsara or nirvana in its positive sense.

In the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, there is this exchange, from the section called the Description of Perfect Wisdom:

Subhuti: Who can understand
this perfection of wisdom?

The Lord: Bodhisattvas
who have coursed
under Tathagatas in the past,
and who have matured
their wholesome roots.

Subhuti: What is their own-being?

The Lord: Their own-being
is isolated from the need for discipline.

And a teaching called The Essentials of Mahamudra Practice, by the
Venerable Lama Kong Ka, points in the same direction, when it says,

'The core of Mahamudra practice consists of two things, non-effort and non-correction. One should know, however, what this non-correction means. The Jetsun Milarepa explained this point very clearly:

'Concerning the practice of non-correction, one should understand three things: If wandering thoughts and desire passions are not corrected, one will fall into the lower realms. If the Blissfulness, Illumination, and Non-distinction are not corrected, one will fall into the Three Realms of Samsara. Only the immanent Self-mind needs no correction.'

As it's taught, all the Perfections are contained in this.

Putting these two together

Seen from this light, beings have never been anything other than in possession of this jewel, this inner freedom and richness, but, not knowing that, they wander endlessly in one realm after another, sometimes up, sometimes down, but always under the influence of this basic confusion about themselves, and others, and this world we live in.

We could say that the very nature of the imagined continuum is made of the unchanging continuum, but that, as ordinary, untrained people, we don't know that, and so we get the results of our mis-knowledge.

The qualities and characteristics of someone's life that is unaware of their basic nature is different from one who does know this fundamental nature. There is the texture and activity of confusion, the reactive emotions, all the fear and longing. There is the belief in a self that does not exist, except as it has been manufactured by the mind, misapprehending its own nature. We've identified with what we are not, seeing the changing as unchanging, what brings no lasting satisfaction as the pleasant.

All this, on another level, is like a dream. In another way than we usually experience it, due to our clinging to self created concepts, all this was never born, does not exist as we think it does now, and does not cease as we imagine it. It exists against a backdrop of that which abides.

The interaction of these two levels of truth about our experience is the unfolding of freedom from suffering, and the manifestation of positive, liberating activity.

Let us now speak of intrinsic freedom.

For many reasons, this seems to me to be the only worthwhile subject today.

As I understand it, there are two things to consider here – what we take to be about ourselves and others and our world that isn't actually so *at all*, and, what we misconstrue, or miss altogether. Either way we go about understanding these things, the result is the same – deconstruct illusion and you get to the pristine ultimate that's always available, always full and rich, the state of grace we live in, or glimpse that and the wrong concepts we have carried for so long simply dissolve, taking all their impoverished, afflicted effects with them. This is like waking up, only more so.

In his book *As It Is, Volume One*, Tulku Urgyen says:

“Only the authentic state of samadhi can purify or clear up this self-created confusion. More appearances and further fixating will not destroy this. This profound state is present in each individual, if only they would know it! The ultimate nature is already fully present. It is given names like dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya. Our deluded state hides this from us, but it really is this which destroys the delusion.”

It has been compared to the sun, dissolving clouds. The *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* describes our true nature as ‘vast, noble, unlimited and steady...’, and says although ‘it cannot be seized through a sign...’ it can be directly known.

This as a way of life needs to be taken up with both humility and courage, and then the recognition of how things actually are needs to be repeated and become deeply familiar to us, until the habits of delusion fade and are changed at their very root. May it be this way for all of us.

Cultivated and revealed practice

There are two ways of looking at bringing forth positive qualities from within ourselves. One is to see it as something we are cultivating, something we do, such as working at enhancing our patience, or developing loving kindness, or calm, or mindfulness. Another way is to see it as revealing qualities that we already possess. Here, we just remove what obstructs their manifesting, and these qualities shine forth naturally. There's a truth to both these ways of thinking.

There is something to do, as long as there are qualities, such as wisdom or compassion that we want, and know we need to have more of in our lives. On the other side of it, if we didn't already possess these qualities within us, all the practice in the world wouldn't have any effect. It would be like polishing a chunk of coal, and hoping to change its nature.

In this sense, practice has been described as polishing a diamond – if it were just an ordinary stone, then all the efforts in the world wouldn't reveal any brightness, but because there is this naturally existent value, our efforts do have an effect. Liberation, and the realization of all beneficial qualities is therefore possible.

I can think of three teachers who have spoken very clearly about the relationship between our cultivated practice, and the revealed result. One is Tulku Urgyen, the great 20th Tibetan teacher, another is Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, and the third is Ajaan Amaro.

Tulku Urgyen, in his book 'Rainbow Painting' compared what he referred to as 'conditioned virtue', with unconditioned virtue, and 'deliberate mindfulness, and effortless mindfulness'

He says,

'There are two types of mindfulness, deliberate, and effortless. By starting out with deliberate attention, the practitioner can make a clear distinction between being distracted or not.'

'...the mindfulness of deliberate attention is essential in the beginning. Otherwise, by relying on only effortless mindfulness, you may not even

notice whether you are distracted or not. Instead, it is much better to practice deliberate mindfulness even though it is subtly conceptual, and gradually progress to effortless mindfulness.'

He says that our deliberate mindfulness (which is the cultivated part of practice here) is like pressing a light switch, and that *'Once the light is on, you do not have to keep pressing it.'* He says this about what is revealed, *'The natural state is effortless mindfulness.'* and, *'The nature of mind is naturally awake.'*

He says in this same book that, compared with how we usually view calm and insight, on one level, 'samatha' or calm is *'the innate stability of rigpa'* (our original nature) and that the aspect of insight is the awake, or cognizant quality. (which is, again, effortless, and naturally existent)

How can we tell the difference between the cultivated and the revealed aspects of our practice? The cultivated always has some quality of effort to it – it's conditioned, and something we do, whereas the revealed aspects, by contrast, are effortless – they are just who and what we naturally are.

If we were sitting down, and someone told us to sit down, or standing up and someone told us to stand up, or to go someplace where we were already, we'd have no problem at all in doing that – there'd be no feeling of effort at all, because we are already there. In the same way, when we tap into our inherent nature, of loving kindness, for example, there's nothing more we have to do to improve it in any way, or to make this quality increase.

The profound truth of our nature is described in the teachings as unproduced by our efforts, unblemished, beyond delusion, and, as it is, the source of all good qualities, such as our love, courage, patience, joy, intelligence, and so on. It is what they refer to as our Buddha Nature.

This is our *'original, unborn, and undying wisdom, which radiates all the time'*, says Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche. He says, *'This is the most powerful light. At this moment, the undying flame of wisdom is hidden behind or within our phenomenal conceptions. This inner light resides within us, never dimming, never losing its qualities, never dying out.'*

‘Whatever brightness, clarity, analytic energy, or understanding we have actually arise from that original, unborn wisdom. All are none other than the innate nature of our own mind.’

At some point, in the cultivation of mindfulness or loving kindness, or other positive qualities, the practice, we can say, ‘does’ itself. This is the revealed aspect, that is without any effort at all on our part. It’s then like water flowing downhill. This is something that is supremely easeful, and blissful to experience. This is important to understand at some point, so we don’t unnecessarily press, when we don’t need to, and so that we can set down any of that basic idea we may have had, that we don’t inherently have these qualities.

Another difference between the cultivated and the effortless is that, with the cultivated, there’s some sense of an ego, an ‘I’ doing the practice, whereas the revealed seems more to be without self, non-dual, or, putting it another way, completely beyond the concepts of what we’ve habitually taken to be ‘ourselves’ (with all its history, psychology, and so on).

The extent of practice then shifts too, so, for example, when practicing to increase compassion, when the naturally existent comes into it, the result then feels more like what they then call ‘non-referential compassion’ – or, altogether beyond anything the ego could think up, or do.

Another point: sometimes even a glimpse at the revealed nature can lead onward, to further practice on the conditioned level, of self cultivation. And that in turn leads to a deeper realization of that which is unproduced by our efforts, and so on.

One anonymous poem that I recently heard read by James Baraz said,

‘Looking deeply,
love looks back at me;
Looking deeply,
love sees itself;
Looking deeply,
never leaving...’

What effect does this have?

In ‘Opening the Hand of Thought’, Uchiyama Roshi says,

‘From the perspective of conditioned self, original Self represents the direction toward which we should aim. This is the meaning of ‘vow’- going in that direction.’

and,

‘In the Commentary on the Awakening of Mahayana Faith, we read, ‘the true Mind of every sentient being itself teaches and leads each sentient being. This is the Vow of Buddha.’

‘On the other hand, when we consider conditioned self from the ground of original Self, we realize that we are not what we should be. We can’t actualize original Self because we are constrained by the handcuffs and fetters of karma. In this frame of mind, we can’t help but repent.

‘In the very nature of the relationship between original Self and conditioned self, vow and repentance (self- correction) naturally emerge.’

The Thai Forest teacher also Ajaan Maha Boowa has a book called Wisdom Develops Samadhi, which describes this process.

He says:

‘When samādhi steadily develops due to the use of wisdom (any insight), the samādhi then becomes the basis for further wisdom at a higher level. This latter stage then conforms with the basic principle, that samadhi (in turn) develops wisdom.’

Interestingly enough, there are times when we can sense both the cultivated, and what is revealed at the same time. It can happen when there’s a transition gradually taking place in our practice, and this is facilitated by recognizing when it’s happening. That’s the time, of course, to ease up some, to let go of the making an effort, and just allow what is naturally existent in us to manifest.

This has been likened to the sound of a bell – instead of grasping at it, which would only stop the sound, we just let it ring...

The cultivated leads to the immanent, to our innate qualities being revealed. One approach that makes much use of the idea that we all have all of the sublime qualities within us already, says that *‘when the obscurations are removed, then realization dawns effortlessly’*.

and

*The mind is naturally pure,
and only temporarily obscured
by passing conditions*

Practice, they say then, is just aimed at removing what they compare to the clouds, and simply letting the what is likened to the light of the sun in a clear blue sky, effortlessly shine forth.

The third teacher I mentioned who has something to say about the relationship between what I’m calling here the cultivated and the revealed aspects of practice is Ajaan Amaro. In ‘Small Boat, Great Mountain’, his wonderful book connecting the Theravada Traditions with the Great Perfection teachings, he says

‘When we say, “I will now practice loving-kindness” or “I will develop compassion” or “I will keep the five precepts,” we overtly take that particular quality as a practice. In fact, what we are really doing is aligning the conditions of our dualistic mind with the reality of our own nature.

We are helping the conditioned be resonant, harmonious with the unconditioned... the natural disposition of the heart is loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

These qualities naturally radiate forth when the heart is completely free.

This is not some “thing” that “I do.” This is the innate disposition of the pure heart. It’s the same with the factors of enlightenment (mindfulness, contemplation of reality, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity).

and,

‘We take on certain conventional practices, like calming or brightening the

mind, or waking up the mind, but we are just bringing the conditioned realm into alignment with the already existent basic reality. The intrinsic nature of mind is already totally peaceful, totally energetic, and totally awake. That's its inherent nature.

As the Buddha Nature teachings say, *'there is nothing that needs to be removed from this, and there is nothing that needs to be added'*

All the qualities of the Buddhas, and bodhisattvas, are present in our fundamental nature. The Six Perfections are present, and the Four Immeasurables, are spontaneously there.

As Tulku Urgyen said *'All the great qualities of buddhahood – the wisdom, compassion, and the capability to benefit others- all arise from this original wakefulness.'*

Bodhicitta, a Supreme method, a Supreme result

The utmost conception that I know of that we have of the nature of an enlightened mind and enlightened activity is what is called 'bodhicitta'. This is the heart-mind that is always totally dedicated to the ultimate benefit of all beings, both as an aim we can take up, and as the highest result and function of practice.

From what's been said before, we can see how there can be a conceptual aspect to this, and a non-conceptual aspect, which is our original nature, which is there from the beginning, and not needing to be added to or modified in any way.

As before, the conceptual can lead to the innate, to the unfabricated. The purpose then of teachings and practices, including prayers and meditations, are to point this nature out to us, so we can see it, and to help it to awaken in us. By aligning ourselves, on a conceptual level, with this motivation, we create the conditions for just this very nature to manifest. For this reason we can call it a supreme method, having a supreme, and most excellent result.

One part of 'The Sacred Heart-Essence of the Pith Instructions', by Nyoshul

Khen Rinpoche teaches that:

*The Bodhicitta is like the moon which eliminates darkness;
 Bodhicitta is like the all-illuminating sun.
 Bodhicitta expels the chronic disease of obscuring emotions;
 Bodhicitta protects from the terrors of Samsara.*

*Bodhicitta repels the obstacles of the four demons.
 Bodhicitta eliminates the fever of the five poisons.
 Bodhicitta acts as the stallion of endeavor.
 Bodhicitta is the sturdy armor of patience.
 Bodhicitta discards all moral downfalls.*

*Bodhicitta supports the accomplishment of meditative concentration.
 Bodhicitta gives birth to excellent tranquility.*

Bodhicitta causes supreme wisdom to arise in the mind.

*Bodhicitta perfects the great accumulation of merit.
 Bodhicitta brings forth the view of Emptiness.*

*When Bodhicitta is present, the moon of Skilful Means rises.
 If you meditate on Bodhicitta, the sun of Penetrating Insight is evident.*

*If you meditate on Bodhicitta, Pristine Awareness fully unfolds.
 By Bodhicitta, the benefit of others effortlessly arises.'*

May we all realize our original nature,
 with all it's innate perfection,
 and share that with all the world!