A Resource for the Practice of Meditation

Third Edition

by Jason Espada

A note for 2023

What I understand more clearly now is the need to apply whatever we learn about meditation as we go. If we don't do this, and instead just gather a lot of intellectual knowledge, it can be hard know where to begin, or how to proceed.

The aim in the basic practice of meditation, as I understand it now, is to quiet the conceptual mind. Any method can do this for us, if we know what we are looking for, and are then able to put aside proliferating thoughts about practice. It's really very simple, when you get right down to it.

We don't need many practices, as so many fine teachers tell us. We need just one or a few that we have an affinity with, and that we can give our whole self to. Then, we can find that everything is contained in that.

How wonderful!

The problem is, our thoughts are already complicated, and *we* are already complicated, and so what we *don't* need is to continue with just more and more thinking. We need a simple method, and really, I'm thinking now, the more simple, the better, then, gradually, we can quiet down. We can tend towards simplicity.

As the Indian Buddhist teacher Atisha said, *Past a certain point, concepts are an obstacle,* so we need to be skillful when learning, and know when to take them up, and when to let them go.

I remember what a relief it was, to find the Tibetan Buddhist approach to contemplation. Before that, almost all of what I had heard about the rational mind, and thought from the Eastern Traditions was that thinking was the problem, and was to be discarded if we want to find peace.

The Tibetan Tradition, in particular that of the Gelugpa, and Je Tsong Khapa teach that we can use concepts skillfully, *like a person would use a bellows to increase a fire*. They say that we can consider something until the purpose of the teaching, or what it is pointing out to us becomes vivid and clear. Then we can set aside the bellows - the activity of conceptual thought, and directly experience the meaning of our theme, or our meditation, on the breath for example.

They say we can alternate like this. When the experience fades, or becomes less clear, we can reflect again. This way we are including all of our faculties, in a balanced way, in practice.

So how to approach a collection like this one, with essays written over the years on meditation? A little at a time.

I would say that the best way we can learn from any book is to practice, and get some result on our own. Then we can read just a little and practice some more, and see if what we have read is useful for us. If a method or an idea is helpful, that's good, keep learning like that; but if what we read or listen to doesn't help our practice, then it is best to leave it.

Keep this in mind, and let it guide you:

The definition of Dharma is 'that which lessens and removes suffering'

If a teaching or practice does this for us, then it is Dharma, if it does not, then it is not. Like this, Dharma is defined by its function.

See for yourself what works best for you.

Jason Espada
San Francisco
November 30th, 2023

A simpler method of meditation

I think it's a good idea starting out, to aim to have meditation be *as simple as possible. That way, we can tell what is the essential practice. A basic practice that works for us can be our reference point.

I will be brief here.

In Ajahn Lee's book, Inner Strength, he presents meditation in a way that is simple and easy. He says that we only need to do two things, to begin.

We just *bring the mind to the breath*,

and then we *keep the mind on only that,*

letting go of everything else.

Fully aware of my entire body, I breathe in…
fully aware of my entire body, I breathe out…

and relax…

Everything is included in these two, simply bringing the awareness to the in and out breath, as many times as needed, and then just staying with that in a balanced way, relaxed, and awake. On its own, the mind becomes clear.

He says that, from doing just this much, the joy and the ease of meditation will arise naturally, further supporting our practice.

If we like, we can then use other teachings to deepen and clarify our experience, but to me this is the simplest approach to begin with.

See what works best for you.

Preface to the Second and Third Edition

Thirty-one years ago, I attended my first retreat with Thich Nhat Hahn, where I learned his method of meditation that uses gathas, or short meditation poems, along with mindful breathing and walking. I'm amazed when I see that I'm still using this method, and I am grateful beyond words. I celebrate that many others also have been given this and other skillful means for taming their mind, and finding peace, and I would like now to share this great gift, of Buddhist meditation. One need not take up any particular method, but I do hope everyone will find and make use of a simple practice they can rely on, and cultivate, and use as a basis for deepening their practice.

As I've continued to work with teachings on meditation over the years, the essential points have gradually become more clear. I've benefitted a great deal from the precise calm abiding teachings, as well as those on the jhanas. Looking at the first edition of this Resource then, I decided I could do better by keeping a few of the core essays, and adding mostly new writings.

Of the two categories of meditation, calm and insight, the essays in this collection are on the thorough samatha, or calm abiding teachings. I feel these show universal principles of calming the mind and clarifying attention that can be understood and used by anyone.

The introductory essays on wisdom practice that were in a previous edition of this work have been moved to its own collection, with the title *A Key to Buddhist Wisdom Teachings*. These are selected from a larger collection I've been working on the last few years.

Anatta, Prajna Paramita, The Middle Way, Mahamudra and The Great Perfection are all profound subjects, but even a few words can open a door, especially if samadhi-meditation is practiced, hence these writings. I've included a recommended reading and listening list at the end of this book,

and links to collections of traditional teachings for those who want to take up any of these studies.

My purpose is always to offer to meditators both encouragement, and the most effective teachings I've found from these different traditions. Should I have the occasion to revisit these subjects again in the future, and feel the need to revise and update these writings again, I will surely do so. We all do what we can.

May all beings enjoy peace, good health and well being,
and liberation,
just as the Buddha and accomplished teachers have realized,
and have taught

With everlasting thanks to Thich Nhat Hanh, Ajahn Pasanno, Lama Lodro Rinpoche, Ani Tenzin Palmo, Lama Yeshe, Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche, Ajaan Lee, Alan Wallace, Bhante Gunaratana, and to all our kind teachers.

Jason Espada
San Francisco,
July 13th, 2021

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Preface to the First Edition

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. When we practice metta, the mind settles, and there is naturally a warmth, brightness and joy to the mind. I've included in the body of this text just one brief essay on this subject, and a simple meditation. Two other essays on metta can be found in the appendix. Those who would like to read more about this practice are invited to have a look at *Living in Beauty - Buddhist Loving Kindness Practice.*

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

A Resource for the Practice of Meditation - Table of Contents

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Seeing the world of sentient beings,
so full of afflictions,
bodhisattvas arouse their energy,
thinking,

'I should rescue and liberate these beings;
I should purify and emancipate them;

I should lead them,
direct them,

make them happy,
develop them,
and cause them to reach perfect peace.'

Thus dedicated to the salvation of all beings,
the bodhisattva reflects thus,

'By what means can these beings,
fallen as they are into such misery,
be lifted out of it?'

and it occurs to these bodhisattvas,

'The means to do this is nowhere else
but in the realm of knowledge of unobstructed liberation…'

The bodhisattvas thus devote themselves
to their realization of the Buddha's Way,

From The Avatamsaka Sutra - 722

Introduction

When there is respect for meditation

When there is a deep appreciation, respect and reverence for meditation, the Doctrine will flourish; but when the appreciation, respect and reverence for meditation decreases, the Doctrine will decline

– The Buddha

In Buddhism, understanding and cherishing 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 is no result.

Buddhism at its best 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. *The key to every benefit and virtue we might develop 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, of course then 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.

Ringu Tulku points out that there are two words from the Sanskrit that are being translated as meditation. One is *bhavana*, or cultivation, as in the cultivation of loving kindness, or patience, or gratitude; The other is *dhyana*, which is developing the continuity and strength of our attention, with ease and clarity. Sometimes this is translated as collectedness, or concentration.

We can say that whenever there is effective bhavana, the quality of dhyana is present in it.

Meditation in this sense simply means the method we use to calm, quiet, sharpen and clarify the mind. This makes it flexible, able to be put to any good use. By having the qualities brought out by specifically this kind of meditation, we can find every other method is made more effective.

In describing this fundamental practice, Ajahn Chah said,

Strengthening the mind is not done by making it move around, as is done to strengthen the body, but by bringing it to a halt, bringing it to rest…

In Straight From the Heart, Ajahn Maha Boowa says:

When we're resting so as to give rise to stillness, the stillness is the strength of mind that can reinforce discernment and make it agile… Practice these things at separate times…

And Ringu Tulku adds:

Samatha is a way to work on our mind, a very important way to make our mind calm, you can say, to make our mind flexible. I would like to say, flexible.

When you talk about tamed, it's about being flexible - your mind does what you want it to do. You know? If you want to think, you can make it think. If you want to rest, you can make it rest. If you want to focus, you can make it focus. If we can have that kind of control, or flexibility in our mind, then we have got a tamed mind, a trained mind. So the objective for shamatha meditation, basically, is for that; and,

If you can do this kind of practice, then every other kind of meditation becomes easy.

I have found this to be true.

Meditation can have 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 this basic practice of meditation, 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 the fundamental practice of being still and quieting and clarifying attention and strengthening the mind 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 basic 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.

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A note on the word *concentration*: I've noticed that many teachers avoid the term concentration when talking about this kind meditation. Their reasons are that our common connotations for this word feel somewhat tense, and that is not the kind of effort that can be sustained for long.

These days however, I'm thinking that those who know what this practice is referring to will understand and use the word rightly.

The advantage on the other hand, of becoming comfortable with calling this practice, of collectedness, and the gathering of attention *concentration*, is that we are all already familiar with degrees of concentration in our daily lives, and at times when a special, focussed attention has been needed. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu calls this *natural concentration*. Our experience is then a resource we can draw from in self cultivation.

If we think of our practice at times as samadhi, and at times as concentration, cultivating of the continuity of attention and the strength of awareness, jhana, shinay, calm abiding, and meditation, the nature of this essential practice will become clear.

The power of the mind are like rays of light that can be dissipated; when they are concentrated, they illumine everything.

- From Raja Yoga, by Swami Vivekananda

Mindfulness is light.

- Thich Nhat Hahn

Part I

A Basic Method of Meditation; Instructions on Walking Meditation, by Thich Nhat Hanh

A summary of meditation in three steps, by Ringu Tulku

Two Teachers on Skillful Effort in Meditation

Using the Anapanasati Sutta to Cultivate Shinay

A Basic Method of Meditation

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.

Instructions on Walking Meditation, by Thich Nhat Hanh, April, 1989

When you practice kin-hin, slow walking meditation in the hall, you do like that, breathing in, you make a step.

And each step should bring you happiness, otherwise it would not be worth practicing. You practice the gatha, 'In, out, in, out,' and so on. And these steps are very healing. It has the healing power. So enjoy your walking in the meditation hall.

If you have 100 steps to make, these 100 steps are 100 gems. And all of them have to bring peace and happiness to you. All of them have the power to bring healing to you.

And the same thing can be applied when we practice walking meditation outside, only we walk more quickly, because if we go slow like this in the park, people will think it is too queer. So instead of making one breath, one word, instead of making 'in, out', you can do like this- 'in, in, out, out',- it means one breath may be measured by two steps.

And if your lungs want three, you give them three, 'in, in, in, out, out, out', it means my in breath goes with three steps, and my out breath goes with three steps.

And maybe later, when I climb the slope of the hill, my lungs will say that two are enough. So you say, 'in, in, out, out'. So listen to the needs of your lungs, and give them the exact number of steps they need. And you can enjoy repeating that gatha several times before you go back to 'in, in, out, out'.

And practicing walking meditation you combine the breathing and your steps, because between the steps and the breath there is the counting. The

counting, 'one, two', 'one, two'. So the counting is an element that combines the breath and the step into one, and you only have one object of concentration.

And walk as if you breathe with your own feet. Concentrate your mind on the sole of your feet. And walk as if you kiss the earth with your feet. All the pleasant feeling should come through the sole of your feet. Even though you breathe here, the concentration may be on the sole of your feet.

And if you see something too beautiful to neglect, please feel free to stop and to contemplate it, to be in touch. You stop, but let people continue, but with the condition that you should continue the breathing.

'Breathing in, the pine is so beautiful,
breathing out, so green,
Breathing in, I am the pine,
breathing out, the pine is me'

You create your own gathas when you breathe like that, otherwise the pine tree will vanish and the thinking will be resettled here. So, mindful breathing is to nourish the mindfulness of what is in the present moment. And that is the technique, the secret of success.

Inside here, we just take one breath, one step. And you know that the wooden floor, it is as wonderful as the grass outside. It is the sunshine that has made the floor. It is the cloud that brings the water to the trees that grow. So when you walk on the wooden floor you may have the feeling that you are walking on the rain, on the clouds, on the sunshine. It depends on how deep is your power of concentration, your mindfulness. The deeper the mindfulness is the more pleasant the contact between you and the floor will be. So mindfulness, awareness, is the base of your peace and your happiness.

It's like when you have a toothache, you got enlightened- you know that not having a toothache is a wonderful thing. Right? But that enlightenment you don't keep very long. When you do not have a toothache, you don't feel very happy. Because you don't nourish the mindfulness that not having a toothache is a wonderful thing.

We shall go out and practice, and enjoy our walking, walking, but not arriving. We don't need to arrive.

A Summary of Meditation in three steps, by Ringu Tulku, from Meeting Challenges

I like to describe meditation in three steps. The first is called *bringing your body onto the seat*. This does not literally mean sitting. Sitting is one way you can meditate, but you can meditate while walking, while lying down, while eating, while doing anything at all.

Bring your body onto the seat means that you let go of other activities…

Bringing your mind into your body is second… When your mind becomes one with your body, that means you are here, now. Your mind is here, now.

In this body you see through your eyes, you hear through your ears, you feel with your body- only now, not yesterday, and not in the last moment…

If I can just be now in this very moment, what I see is what I see, what I hear is what I hear at this very moment, then this is now, and this is now, and this is now…

When I can be in this very present moment, continuously, moment by moment, I am truly present.

And so (in this meditation) there are not too many concepts…Meditation is learning to be in an experiential way, now.

The third point is *bringing ease into your mind*. This means that you feel your mind to be at ease, kind of spacious, easy, and relaxed. It means that you are just being…

When you are breathing out, be aware of breathing out, slightly, just to be in the present moment. So, that's how to start the meditation…

Two Teachers on Skillful Effort in Meditation

From Simple Guidelines to Meditation for Beginners, by Bhikkhu Bodhi

In sustaining awareness of the object, you should try to maintain two complementary qualities: firmness and softness. Your attention should be *firm* in so far as it remains continuously on the object, without wandering or drifting off into drowsiness and daydreaming. It should be *soft* in that you do not forcefully "press" your attention against the object, but just let it rest there as if it were "sitting" on the spot where you experience the breath most clearly and distinctly, either at the nostrils or via the rising and falling of the abdomen.

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From Focused and Fearless, by Shaila Catherine

From the chapter Effort, Ease, and Intention

Skillful application of effort is fundamental to the art of meditation. You must apply yourself completely, yet without force…

A composed, coordinated, gentle attention is usually enough to meet the rapidly changing perceptions that unfold.

Using the Anapanasati Sutta to Cultivate Shinay

Introduction - Tending Towards Simplicity

There are a few ways in general that we can practice with the Sutra on Mindfulness of Breathing. One is to think of the 16 steps as following one after the other, organically. We can also go briefly through the steps, or the tetrads (sequences of 4 steps) and then focus just one one part, or even just one step. As Thich Nhat Hanh has said, *practicing any one of these meditations can bring insight, and freedom of mind.*

There's a world to be found in this practice. For example, at some point, naturally we can sense the relationship between feeling and thought, or mental activity. When we are comfortable, the mind naturally settles down, and attention more easily stays with the breath. As Lama Yeshe said, 'When our minds are satisfied, they don't wander.' It goes the other way was well. As Thay taught, when there is some strong emotion, we can also focus exclusively on the breath, which quiets down the mind, and this settles the feeling.

Since I would like to primarily use this Sutta to cultivate a clear and flexible mind, that can then be used for insight practice, it's easy to just go step by step, and observe the results. It even feels at times like the Buddha's meditation came first, and then this description of a natural process came later, to encourage others. It goes from the more tangible physical body to the more subtle feeling nature, and then more subtle mind, and themes for liberating insight.

Generally, in meditation, I've found it useful to cultivate a feeling of *tending towards simplicity* in practice. It counters over thinking, otherwise known as elaboration, and replacing thoughts about meditation for direct experience.

This breath meditation is actually a very simple practice. We just *find the breath* (1), and stay with it for a few breaths, or however much as we like; then we simply *know how it is* - whether is it long or short, rough or smooth, comfortable, light, or easy, and so on (2). Being mindful of breath all the way through the inhalation and the exhalation, leads naturally to *sensing how it feels in our whole body* (3); which is calming and relaxing all by itself. At this point in his explanation of the Sutta, Thay translates the fourth instruction as *allowing the body to relax*.(4)

This brings *joy* and *ease*, the fifth and sixth steps in the practice, as outlined in the Sutta.

Then, when it comes to the seventh step, we are maintaining mindfulness of the breath, and *observing the relationship between feeling and thought*

Breathing in, I am aware of the conditioning of my mind…
Breathing out, I am aware of the conditioning of my mind…

We can see how useful this practice alone can be.

Some thoughts we know, such as those of loving kindness, or gratitude bring delight to our feelings. Reading and reflecting for a time on uplifting themes can influence our entire day, or week. On the flip side, some thoughts we can clearly see bring upset or agitation, and are burdensome, or depressing. There is a lot of self knowledge to be gained from just this field of observation.

On the basis of experiencing very tangible or more subtle joy and ease, we can *calm the mind* (8) by relaxing, or we can say, slowly, gently and patiently *allowing the mind to settle and become clear* on its own.

This leads onwards, to *observing, brightening, concentrating* (collectedness, unifying the mind) and *liberating the mind.* These are steps 9 through 12, the third tetrad here, which focusses primarily on the mind.

One of the wonderful aspects of a practice such as this is that we can always check to see what is easy for us. If something is inaccessible for a time, we can always take up a preceding step or a more tangible area of focus. There's a sequence that's clearly laid out, and we can take up whatever is useful for us to progress towards greater ease, continuity of attention, and natural clarity.

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Using the Anapanasati Sutta to Cultivate Shinay

The calm abiding teachings (shi-nay or samatha) usually use an object, such as a Buddha image or an external object to cultivate (this) peace and lucidity. What I'd like to do here is to outline how the teachings from the Anapanasati Sutta can be used to this same end.

When the awareness of breathing is taught in the Tibetan Tradition, it is usually given briefly as a preliminary practice, but I'd like to introduce this set of teachings as *a main method* that can accomplish this practice.

There are 16 steps in the Anapanasati Sutta, that cover cultivating both calm and insight, and they are divided into four groups, with four exercises in each: for the body, feeling, mind, and objects of mind. The last four are recommended as themes for insight - impermanence, letting go, cessation (the no-birth, no-death nature of all phenomena - TNH), and relinquishment.

The first twelve steps then are for this practice, of cultivating calm and clarity.

The three groupings, of body, feeling, and mind make this easy to remember, and to put into actual practice. They can be remembered in a

shorthand way, just bringing to mind body, feeling, and mind, or in more detail.

Steps 1 - 12 in the Anapanasati Sutta are as follows. This is from the translation by Thich Nhat Hanh, with a few notes.

{Body}

It is like this, bhikkhus: the practitioner goes into the forest or to the foot of a tree, or to any deserted place, sits stably in the lotus position, holding his or her body quite straight, and practices like this: 'Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.'

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu calls this 'finding' the breath. A moment before also, we were breathing, but we may not have been aware of it. Here, we bring our attention to this simple fact, of our breathing in and out.

One interesting note at this point, although we may number the progressive steps, we are still practicing this first instruction, all the way through the entire calm abiding section of the Mindfulness of Breathing Sutta. When we practice the second step, the first is still there, as it is in the third, fourth, fifth, and so on.

The Sutta continues

1. 'Breathing in a long breath, I know I am breathing in a long breath. Breathing out a long breath, I know I am breathing out a long breath.

2. 'Breathing in a short breath, I know I am breathing in a short breath. Breathing out a short breath, I know I am breathing out a short breath.

Here, 'a long breath' or 'a short breath' means however the breath is. As Thich Nhat Hanh taught, it's not that we make the breath longer or shorter. We just observe how it is so. Starting with 'finding the breath', and bringing

our attention to it, we now see how it is, if it is long or short, easy or not, comfortable or not. However it is, we are aware of it. This in itself calms us to some extent.

Here we are introducing a wisdom factor, called in the Theravada teachings *sampajanna*, or *clear comprehension*. Often in these teachings the compound term *sati-sampajanna*, or *mindfulness-and-clear-comprehension* is used. We are not only breathing in and out, or standing, or walking or reaching out to pick something up, we are doing it with full awareness and discernment.

3. 'Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body. Breathing out, I am aware of my whole body.' He or she practices like this.

4. 'Breathing in, I calm my whole body. Breathing out, I calm my whole body.' He or she practices like this.

The Thai Forest Tradition and Thich Nhat Hanh both teach us to bring mindfulness to the whole body and to permeate the body with awareness. This is enjoyable and refreshing, and all by itself this gradually calms our body, and mind as well. We can also cultivate peace by *intending* to do so, and this is very good to know. It's useful for our whole lives.

I have thought that people practicing loving kindness meditation, or mantra can surely benefit from this practice that brings an awareness of the quality of mind and feeling to the body. It is easy to see the connection between our state of mind and how we feel physically, and then to cultivate the kinds of experiences, of peace, stability and well being that we want for ourselves, and that we want to share with others. This leads naturally to the following exercises.

5. 'Breathing in, I feel joyful. Breathing out, I feel joyful.' He or she practices like this.

6. 'Breathing in, I feel happy. Breathing out, I feel happy.' He or she practices like this.

'Joyful' and 'happy' here are Thay's translation of *piti*, and *sukha*. These are wonderful experiences we can identify and then cultivate in our meditation and in our daily lives. They are the basis for going easily towards states of jhana, or cultivating the qualities of shamatha. The mind naturally stays with the breath or its theme or object when it is both awake and clear, and comfortable.

Joy is a term here for a pleasant feeling that has some uplift or excitement in it. Joy can be created and increased when we need more energy by simply taking pleasure in the virtue we have that serves as a foundation for our practice, or in the relief we feel when setting aside the hindrances for this time. We can think of our teachers, or of our great good fortune in meeting the Dharma, or other uplifting themes. Joy can be strong or subtle, but when it is there, we should recognize it. It's a kind of necessary spiritual food.

When joy settles it becomes *well being*, *sukha*, or meditative happiness. This is also something we should learn to cultivate and then learn to recognize. It is the feeling of being settled, satisfied, awake, and at ease.

It's been liked to the feeling of arriving at our destination after a long trip, and sitting down with a cool, refreshing drink. There is a sense of happiness, fullness, accomplishment, ease and well being.

* * *

Four gathas taught by Thich Nhat Hanh, taught between 1987 and 1993, and how they line up with the experiences cultivated in this Sutta:

I attended my first retreat with Thay in 1989, and in the first session, one person asked him to remind them of the gatha, or short meditation poem he had offered to the community on his last visit, in 1987. It was

Breathing in, I calm body and mind
Breathing out, I smile
Dwelling in the present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment

Then in the years 1989, '91, and '93 he offered the following:

In - out
Deep - slow
Calm - Ease
Smile - Release
Present moment,
Wonderful Moment

In sitting and walking meditation, each line can be brought to mind, along with the in and out breath, as many times as one likes.

In - out
Flower - fresh
Mountain - solid
Water - reflecting
Space - free

and,

(one inhalation and exhalation per line for the following)

I arrive
I am home
In the here

In the now
I feel solid
I feel free
In the ultimate,
I dwell

Over the years practicing with these meditation poems, and also studying both his and other traditional teachings on the Anapanasati Sutta, it became easy to see how these short verses are intended to lead a person gracefully through the experiences presented in that Sutta. They begin with simply being aware of the breath, and the body; they calm the feelings and calm and brighten the mind.

Although Thich Nhat Hanh and many of the teachers from the Thai Forest Tradition do not use the language of the jhanas, or the calm abiding tradition, they certainly do cultivate these very same qualities, as a way to make the mind clear and serviceable, 'fit for use'. They about bring the same pliancy, freshness and joy, and strength that is then used to cultivate insight - understanding.

* * *

Returning to the Sutta, steps 7 and 8 are on the relationship between feeling and the mind, calming the mind, respectively. This involves setting aside and overcoming the hindrances to meditation.

7. 'Breathing in, I am aware of (feeling) conditioning the mind
Breathing out, I am aware of (feeling) conditioning the mind.'
He or she practices like this.

In direct translation from the Sutta, *'citta sankara'* is called *'Mental formation',*

'Breathing in, I am aware of my mental formations. Breathing out, I am aware of my mental formations.' He or she practices like this…

This refers to *conditioning the mind*, an active verb here, more than it being so much a noun or state of being.

This is the instruction to see how the quality of our feeling effects our mind - thought, memory, and interpretation. We can see also how thought, or mental activity also clearly effects feeling.

{For more on this practice, see this essay, On Step Seven of the Anapanasati Sutta.}

8. 'Breathing in, I calm my mental formations (thought and feeling). Breathing out, I calm my mental formations (thought and feeling).' He or she practices like this.

Naturally, as we keep practicing being aware of our breathing, and body, calming the body, bringing joy and ease, the mind calms down, and becomes more clear. We don't have to make any special effort to make it so.

Bhante Gunaratana only half-kiddingly said that he thought patience should be added to the list of traditional factors that bring about the jhanas. If we stay with the practice, patiently, with humility and attention and confidence in ourselves and the practice itself, gradually our mind calms down, and becomes more clear and bright.

Ajahn Sumedho also said the following:

If you wait and endure restlessness

When you try to get rid of fear or anger, what happens? You just get restless or discouraged and have to go eat something or smoke or drink or do something else. But if you wait and endure restlessness, greed, hatred, doubt, despair, and sleepiness, if you observe these conditions as they cease and end, you will attain a kind of calm and mental clarity, which you will never achieve if you're always going after something else.

{Mind}

9. 'Breathing in, I am aware of my mind. Breathing out, I am aware of my mind.' He or she practices like this.

10. 'Breathing in, I make my mind happy. Breathing out, I make my mind happy.' He or she practices like this.

I like to call step ten in this Sutta *'brightening the mind'*, and it lines up perfectly with the stages of calm abiding where one is settled and naturally present with the meditation, and then more subtle dullness or the lack of vividness is the challenge to move through. We can brighten the mind at any time, in any context, but here it has the special function of removing those more subtle veils or obscurations that keep us from seeing fully, and clearly, with real vividness, and precision.

We can't push this to make it happen. We need a host of supporting factors in meditation, and one of them can be our joy and happiness in the Dharma. There is an organic process to cultivating the mind. From the beginning steps, that we go over each time we meditate, to this point, all of it unfolds based on the previous steps being done well, with enthusiasm, care and patience over time. They lead to:

11. 'Breathing in, I concentrate my mind. Breathing out, I concentrate my mind.' He or she practices like this.

and

12. 'Breathing in, I liberate my mind. Breathing out, I liberate my mind.' He or she practices like this.

Sometimes a change in phrasing can make a big difference in terms of how we hear a teaching. For example, if we hear that we should have indestructible single pointed concentration, it may sound like more than we

can do. We may 'squeeze ourselves' - which is not so skillful. We need to be aware, and also to gently relax. If on the other hand we think of *concentrating the mind* here in the sense of *giving something our undivided attention* - Buddhadasa calls this 'natural concentration', it can seem like something that we can do, at least for a time. We've all had this experience, when, having set aside distractions, we make an effort and our attention is there in full. I also like the word *collectedness* here, as there are degrees to it, but it's also something that we've all experienced at times.

The liberation that is mentioned then in step 12 refers to the temporary freedom of mind accomplished through practicing these steps. We provisionally set aside the hindrances (anger and craving, restlessness, sloth and torpor, and doubt), and with faith in our teachers and the teachings and ourselves, we take up this practice, and gain some result.

It's suggested in the teachings on jhana that we review the steps we took to get each result. That way we can repeat them at will, and gain the benefit, and continue our practice from there, further refining and liberating the mind.

Part II. Essays on Meditation

Distinguishing Mindfulness and Awareness

I.

A challenge - but not one that is unsolvable

The word *mindfulness* is so well known these days that to use it with anything other than the commonly accepted meaning, and be understood, presents quite a challenge. It is important to make this attempt though, as I hope will become clear in what follows.

There are two distinct experiences that are being referred to with these two words - mindfulness, and awareness, and if they get blended together, or used interchangeably, then we're at risk of losing the meaning of this teaching, one that has been handed down to us through many generations.

In what follows, I would like to describe *Mindfulness As Keeping Our Aim In Mind.* Traditionally, the word *sati* has a broader range of meaning than simply awareness of an object or an experience. It is knowing our purpose. It is having a sense of context, the memory and knowledge of what we are doing, and why we are doing it.

If we are aiming to alleviate our own suffering, and put an end to it, and to help others in this world as much as we can, this function known as mindfulness - as recollection - is crucial. If we forget, or lose the sense of what we are aiming to do, and why, for a time at least, we stray from accomplishing our purpose. This is as true here as it would be if we were making a cake, or driving to some destination.

We can see how this word mindfulness, however, has been used to refer almost exclusively to another necessary function of the mind in practice - that of maintaining awareness.

Our mind, when untrained, moves from one object or experience to another, restless, dissatisfied, and superficial. The quality that counters this is collectedness - a gathering together of attention, and a continuity and clarity of awareness that can be developed. This is what is accomplished in both samatha and jhana meditation.

Since we can have a range of motivations when meditating, and experiences and teachings to guide us, our *mindfulness as recollection* of what we are doing and why we are doing it, in Sanskrit *smriti*, or in Pali *sati,* is essential. When we know what we are aiming to do, or where we are aiming to go, then any time we get off track, or lose the object, we know it immediately, intuitively, and return to the practice, or a fruitful way to proceed.

II.

Mindfulness As Keeping Our Purpose In Mind

Perhaps you've had this experience too. On some days when I'm out and about, and there are lots of other people out also, I'll think to myself. *Who are all these people?* and, *Where are they going?* We may be going in the same direction, but with a different purpose, and with very different goals in mind. At the end of the day also, most of us are going to end up in different places.

This analogy comes to mind when trying to understand some fundamental Buddhist terms that have come down to us. I'm trying here to get a sense here of how to use the teachings effectively.

Some words have different meanings, and if I'm not careful, they overlap and lose their effect.

Looking at the word 'mindfulness', for example, I can see it's referring to being aware, always. Sometimes though here in the West so far this word has been used mean to *just* being aware of what we are doing in the present moment, and no more than that. There's a fuller, more encompassing meaning though that has sometimes been communicated as *recollection*. *We know what we are doing, and why we are doing it*, as Lama Yeshe put it.

To return to the earlier analogy, this would be like going out to the store or to a particular market with a definite purpose, say, to buy some bread and then to return straight home. Our walking then is guided by that mindfulness, or by that recollection. If we forget what we are doing, or where we are going, even for just a short time, then it's going to take us longer to accomplish our purpose. We may even return home empty handed, or not at all. This is *forgetfulness*, which is *the opposite of* mindfulness as *retention, or recollection.*

We can then see how this definition has many applications in Buddhist practice, or in spiritual practice.

Right mindfulness emerges only within the context of right view and right intention - B. Alan Wallace

We begin with a motivation, whatever we are doing.

It may be that we have the motivation to make our own lives better, to have less stress, doubt and fear, or anxiety, and we see rightly that Dharma practice is a way to bring this about. If we remember this intention, we'll carry this throughout a meditation session and with us into our daily lives. It's not just something we do on the cushion. This is where memory, care and conscientiousness, come in, avoiding the elements throughout the day and night that oppose our overall purpose.

Mindfulness *as recollection* now is more than just the bare awareness of what is happening in the present moment, divorced from everything else.

Rather, it has *a sense of context, and a sense of purpose*. Again, we know what we are doing, and why we are doing it.

We can also gain some certainty that liberation is possible, as it is taught in Buddhism and in other spiritual traditions. This completely changes how we feel about what we are doing, from within. Compared to before, we have a different, and far greater aim in mind.

I imagine someone making their way purposefully through a crowded market. They know clearly where they are going, and they skillfully navigate the challenges they meet, as they make their way. Without such a strong, clear sense of purpose, drawing on history when needed, they would wander, perhaps getting distracted by all the activity around them, and become lost.

In the same way, if we begin with a good motivation, to take better care of ourselves for example, or to become free from suffering, we may forget, and then the practice loses its effectiveness. This sense of purpose and the full understanding of how we can accomplish our aims needs to be kept in mind, clearly and continuously present. Without it, our progress can be delayed, indefinitely, just like the person who goes to a market, but then forgets for a time where they are, why they are there, or where they are going.

We can even see the great need in this world for more healthy and balanced people, free of greed and aggression and small mindedness, *and set out with the aim to become liberated and as helpful as we can for others in this place and time*. If we forget this, our motivation though, even for a short while, we may stop and entertain ourselves, or succumb to despair or to loneliness. With *sati,* mindfulness as recollection, *this greater purpose* than our own benefit alone though *kept clearly in mind,* this does not happen. It's like we are going out for food, or going to get medicine for our precious loved ones. Conscientiousness, patience, diligence, focus and finding meaning in all that we do then all follow quite naturally.

When it comes to particular meditation practices then also, we can see this same beautiful quality, of mindfulness as keeping our purpose in mind, at work.

For example, in meditation, when we are cultivating a clear and peaceful mind, one of the faults is called *forgetfulness*, losing the object, and its antidote is mindfulness, as recollection. This is knowing what we are doing, as we are sitting, or walking. The vivid sense of purpose is there throughout, non-verbally. It guides us. When we forget, this sense of what we are aiming to do is what brings us back to the object of awareness, whether it be the breath, or our posture, or steps, mantra, or visualization, or theme of meditation.

They say in this context, *the function of mindfulness here is non forgetting, keeping the objet in mind.*

When we meditate on the subject of death also, to increase our understanding of this truth, it is forgetting that is the opposite of keeping this in clear awareness. There is a great difference in the quality of our lives and practice when this mindfulness is present.

I've been thinking a lot lately of what *only appear* to be separate worlds. Sports, cooking shows, amoral, mind-less materialism in all its vulgar excesses all *seem to be* removed from one another and from the rest of our lives and this greater world. The truth of it though is that the feeling of being a world apart is *an illusion*, that has tragic consequences for us all. We ignore needs all around us, on account of this forgetting. Our values collectively are deluded - ignorantly selfish, and ultimately destructive of even our own ends.

Waking up to our lives here, and responding as well as we can to the human, animal, and environmental needs of this time, from wherever we are *is all included in being mindful, and aware.* We may deny it, or avoid it, but then,

from a human perspective, such lives are immature, and smaller than they could be, and there is bound to be a lack of fulfillment, and conflict between us, as individuals, or as groups. And so I offer this prayer:

May we all awaken,
care for ourselves
and for all of our precious family, with wisdom,
and find meaning,
and the fulfillment of our lives here on earth!

The Need for Samatha

They say that nothing moves without intention. Before we begin a project, or a way of life, or meditation, we need to know its benefits. This comes first. Once we're convinced of these, everything else follows naturally. It may take time, and effort, but when this much is clear, there's an ease to it as well. To that end, I'd like to say something about the need for a certain kind of meditation, *that is essential* if we wish to receive the fruits of Buddhist practice.

The traditions of samatha or *calm abiding meditation*, and that of *the jhanas* are two sets of teachings that have come down to us, and that when practiced lead to our being able to have deeper, transformative experiences.

Geshe Gyalten Kunga defines it this way:

Calm abiding is the capacity of the mind to remain fully focused on the chosen object of meditation with clarity and stability, for as long as we wish, while experiencing the bliss of physical and mental pliancy. Once calm abiding is established, it is then utilized to achieve new levels of realization, in conjunction with other practices.

Both the Tibetan and Theravada lineages tell us that calm abiding meditation is common to both Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions, and that Buddhism uses this kind of mind to look deeply, to cultivate discernment, and to accomplish liberation from suffering and its causes. This is the aim of all Buddhist practice, although it's not emphasized in modern day teachings.

The union of samatha and vipaśyana is the true antidote to all your suffering and problems.

- Geshe Sopa

It's true that we can gain some relief from suffering, confusion, and despair through practicing ethics, metta loving kindness, and quiet sitting meditation, but the liberation the Buddha taught, that doesn't regress, comes from deep and sustained meditation on the truth.

Scholars have the acquired intellectual knowledge of the means of liberation, and may even add to this body of knowledge, *but the accomplishment of the teachings comes from their enthusiastic practice*, and this means exactly this - *with zeal, cultivating the qualities of calm abiding or jhana meditation, joined with insight.*

What works for me is to think of these qualities, and to try to first identify and then to aim to develop them in my own experience. Rather than being distracted by trying to attain one or more of the different levels that are described in these methods, I find this to be more useful.

Some traditions present the teachings intellectually, which people first study then go and practice. Others say our meditation should come first, and only gradually should the ideas of past accomplished masters be introduced. Everyone is different, but the aim is the same for all of us: that of liberation from suffering.

If we have the intention to benefit ourselves and others, then shi-nay, or calm abiding is essential to accomplish all of our aims. Without it, we continue to manifest suffering, or else we still carry the latent tendencies in our mindstream for confusion and the afflictive emotions, of pride, jealousy, anger, craving, and despair.

Only shinay and lak-tong, *the unified path of calm and insight* remedy these on the deepest level.

Geshe Sopa said:

Only when samatha is firm and you cultivate vipasyana do you begin to remove the bondage of dysfunctional tendencies from the root.

And in his *Lines of Experience*, Lama Je Tsong Khapa wrote:

In a state of merely single-pointed meditative concentration,
you do not have the insight
that gives you the ability to cut the root of cyclic existence.

Moreover, without the factor of calm abiding,
wisdom by itself cannot turn back the delusions,
no matter how much you analyze them…

(therefore) the zealous have marveled
at the attainment of the union of calm abiding and penetrative insight.
Is there need to mention that you should pray to attain this as well?

Thinking over the benefits of calm abiding, again and again, is sure to produce *the strong aspiration to practice these teachings,* and its here that we see how every part of ourselves is involved in the great work of our own inner transformation, and our service to all our loved ones, and all beings.

Aspiring bodhicitta is the aim to realize the path so we can help others also to freedom, well being and joy. This naturally becomes *Engaging bodhicitta*, which is the actual practice of the Path - the Six Paramitas, of Generosity, Ethics, Patience, Effort, *Meditation* and Wisdom. This is where we find we need to hear and understand *and then to gradually practice* all the teachings on calm abiding, or the jhanas without neglecting anything or leaving anything out. (All this comes about quite naturally when we hear the benefits of samatha.)

On relative levels, *concentration empowers all virtuous activities*. We can easily see how this works. When our mind focussed and clear, all that we would do in terms of spiritual practice is improved - all of our study, mantra

recitation, and prayer, and all the ways we engage and benefit others is enhanced.

Samatha, it should then be known, is essential to accomplishing the great purpose, of our own liberation, and the realization that enables us to truly, and substantially help others.

It's truly unfortunate that few people these days who encounter Buddhism will hear about *samatha*, or calm abiding meditation, and of those who do learn something about it, only a small number will take up its practice energetically, and gain the result. For some reasons, it's not being emphasized, even when it is occasionally taught.

All the great benefits we can gain through Buddhist practice depend on deep and clear meditation, done patiently and diligently over time.

Without a great depth of realization, as it turns out, problems are endless, but the Buddha's profound teaching - that he presented as The Third Noble Truth, that *suffering can be brought to an end* can be verified by each one of us. The path he outlined and that has been followed by two and a half millennia of realized men and women was that of ethics, meditation, and wisdom.

How fortunate we are today, to have received these teachings, and to have the examples of our Noble, accomplished teachers! Without them, these teachings would be hard, or even impossible to understand. Their skill and compassion, and their dedication to realizing the teachings and guiding their students is truly moving.

May we all achieve the full result of Buddhist practice,
just as Shakyamuni and all of our Noble teachers have intended
May we all actualize the complete Path,
and may all beings benefit

Revisiting the Jhanas - on the teachings of Bhante Gunaratana

The jhanas are states of calm, and awake meditation that can be cultivated for the purpose of developing insight and freeing the mind. My familiarity with these Buddhist teachings come from the Thai Forest tradition, particularly from Ajahn Lee, and the Western Abbot of Abhayagiri Monastery, Ajaan Pasanno.

I noticed from my library record that I had actually read the book, Beyond Mindfulness in Plain English, by Bhante Gunaratana, seven years ago. At that time, I must have heard it differently than I do now, because I don't remember connecting in any deep way with his explanation. Usually these stages in meditation are presented in a way that seem rare and inaccessible for almost everyone. This time though, I had a different experience, backed up by listening to retreat talks on the subject by Bhante G, from 2004, that clarified the unique method he taught at that time.

My entry to these teachings

There is one other extensive description of Buddhist states of meditation that I know of, that comes from the Tibetan Tradition, and that goes by the name of the *calm abiding* teachings, *shi-nay* or *shamatha*. Like the teachings on the jhanas, at one time these also seemed obscure and inaccessible to me, with lists such as 'the five faults and eight antidotes' and 'the nine stages of calm abiding'.

The way I found my way into their practice, while on retreat in 2012, was to change my thinking about these teachings. At that time, instead of checking my experience against what was written, I compared what was written with my own personal experience, with that as the primary point of reference. When I did that, the teachings opened up for me. I could identify the factors being talked about in a personal way, and instead of aiming to accomplish this stage or that, and always checking and comparing myself

to an idea, I simply worked to cultivate the factors described in the teachings that I could see in some form in my own mind.

When I approach the teachings on jhana in this way, they make much more sense than trying for this level, or that one. I can easily identify, for example, what they call the five factors that go to make up the first jhana:

vitaka - initial application of thought
vichara - sustained application of thought
piti - joy
sukha - ease

and

ekaggata - one pointed concentration

In jhana, these all go together. Even this much has proven workable and useful to me over the years.

Engaging Bhante Gunaratana's teachings on the jhanas this time, there were *two main insights* that stood out to me as unique, and very useful.

One led to the other.

The first was his clear explanation of what is called a 'mental factor'. This is a term I've been hearing for years now, and thinking that I knew its meaning. For the most part I've taken a mental factor to be something like a mental state, discrete from other states of mind and aspects of being. Bhante G's teachings have dispelled that notion, and this relates to how he taught jhana.

Both his retreat talks and his book on the subject, he describes a mental factor as a state or quality of mind we can generate *that continues through our lives and meditations.* Because it is conditioned, it does fade, and it does have

to be renewed and enhanced, but for a time, its influence can be felt and seen. A cultivated mental factor, such as warm hearted metta has a definite effect on the quality of our sitting and walking practice, for example.

Before going on to describe the second related unique quality of Bhante G's teachings, I would like to say that the effect of recognizing the nature of a mental factor has been an enrichment of my understanding of my own mind, from day to day and hour by hour.

The Buddha's teachings say

We are what we think
having become what we have thought…

and although I knew these words, their truth was not as apparent before.

If a mental factor is present in me now, such as patience, or enthusiasm, I know it is there because of how I've used my mind up to this time. If something is absent and I want it to be present, I know I can also cultivate that quality. Seeing the presence or absence of mental factors in this fluid way, arriving together, complimenting each other or working against each other, opens the way to cultivating what we want, and gradually lessening and removing those factors that do not serve our interests.

The second helpful teaching from Bhante G is related to this, and that is *his unique definition of the first factor* mentioned in the cultivation of jhana, called vitaka or initial application.

This is described by every other teacher I know of simply as 'bringing the mind to the object of meditation', such as the breath, or walking, or to a text or quality such as loving kindness.

By contrast, Bhante refers extensively to this first factor not only as one action, bring the object to mind, but to a range of contemplations, that

make it easier to settle the mind without distraction. These include metta, loving kindness, karuna, compassion, and letting go. In his talks, all of these he repeatedly calls initial application of thought, making it abundantly clear that he considers them to be a vital part of jhana meditation itself, and not simply preparatory practices.

He says that jhana consists of the removal of certain factors of mind, and the cultivation of others:

We remove the five hindrances: anger, greed, restlessness, sloth and torpor, and doubt;

and

we cultivate the five jhanic factors of initial application of thought, sustained application of thought, joy, ease and one pointedness.

In his book, Beyond Mindfulness in Plain English, he has one chapter with the title *'Why can't we concentrate well already?'* - to which he answers, it is because of the five hindrances. When these are pacified for a time - and at this stage they are simply pacified, and not active - then it becomes much easier to concentrate well.

Where then does that leave the traditional definition of vitaka - the initial application of mind, bringing the mind to the object? I've chosen to keep both this definition and to add Bhante's more extensive explanation because they both have a place in practice.

What Bhante G's definition makes clear is that the way we use our mind prior to trying to contemplate one subject makes a great difference in whether the process will go well or not.

It can be like cultivating the ground well where we would grow something. Anything we plant then has the best chance to flourish.

Cultivating metta, I have known, produces comfort and ease, as well as joy; it brings energy and light to the mind, and these are all very useful qualities that can then be brought to all the meditations we do.

On some level, I see now I had the idea of preparatory practices being more separate from the meditation than they actually are. It was as if there were a solid wall between them, whereas I now see these states as fluid, porous, permeable. To this I owe thanks to Bhante.

He makes it clear that

what we cultivate 'beforehand'
are actually part of the practice,
like streams that then feed and nourish a tree,
so that flowers and fruit can develop.

He even goes so far as to call them *the first step in the practice of jhana meditation itself.*

Another vitaka, *nekhama*, is sometimes translated as relinquishment, renunciation, or letting go. He describes this factor as generosity, but also describes it in his talks as temporarily giving something up. This can be taken all the way up to the renunciation of all of samsara, but there are levels to it along the way that are helpful to know about and to practice. He says, for example, that we can give up something as simple as a single piece of chocolate, and once we begin looking for attachments, or thoughts and interests we can set aside for a time, we find that we are creating a sense of space, and freeing up our energy to practice.

Bhante makes clear in his book that we can consider the setting aside of interest or involvements as something temporary, and provisional, as in, for the purpose of getting us from one place to another.

Until we practice deep meditation and develop insight, we are suspending the activity of the kilesas, or hindrances. We are pacifying them for a time. Their roots are still there in us, and are only removed later. This practice, of jhana, and all that it consists of, is a means to that end, and to the end of all suffering.

After re-reading Beyond Mindfulness in Plain English, I found recordings on youtube of the first jhana retreat given by Bhante, in 2004, in Virginia. In it, he more thoroughly explains the connection between the vitakas - *plural- the initial applications of thought* - and the practices we then go on to do.

At that point I switch back over to the traditional meaning of vitaka and bring my mind to the object, either the breath, or steps in walking meditation, or metta.

One thing that Bhante deemphasized in these teachings is the role of attention, or mindfulness, but as I learned from studying the calm abiding teachings, *this is the main practice* when we are actually cultivating, and I've kept this in mind.

My thinking now about preliminary practices in other lineages has changed now as well. I can see how they produce mental factors, such as loving kindness, and having our priorities in order that are essential to practice well.

Cultivating Factors the Contribute to Ease in Meditation Practice

Traditional teachings on meditation describe what they call ‘preliminary conditions’ that support meditation. These are listed as

A suitable environment

having few desires

having contentment

engaging in few activities

maintaining good ethics, and,

letting go of attachments

In The Emanated Scripture of Manjusrhi, by Shabkar, these six factors are listed as:

1. To dwell in a pleasing place with everything favorable and nothing adverse to meditation

2. To have few desires and little concern about resources and clothing

3. To be content with whatever you have, no matter how inferior

4. To abandon activities such as business transactions, astrology, and medicine

5. To perfectly protect the vows and commitments you’ve taken, and,

6. By contemplating birth, death, and the faults of samsara, to thoroughly give up the concerns of this life

I have found that these are not just something to be acquired once and for all, but that they are each factors that we can continue to cultivate, and that then contribute to the ease of our meditation.

This has become more clear to me after learning from Bhante Gunaratana about the nature of *a mental factor*. He describes it as a quality or state of mind, such as loving kindness, that we can generate through reflection, and that then stays with us for a time and can support jhana, or calm abiding meditation.

Looking again at those factors that are usually listed simply as pre-conditions for practice, I see the same is true. They can each support the ease of meditation all throughout our practice. Consider:

Appreciating a suitable environment

I think of this one as *gratitude*, or *having appreciation*. Like it is with our precious human existence, we may have many fortunate conditions, but it is only our recognizing just what we have now that makes this life qualify as one of great value and meaning for us. Think of all the spoiled, jaded materialists, and their lack of appreciation for the wealth and comfort they have. They don't take advantage of this life and most of the time they are unhappy, and not fulfilled.

When we see that we have a suitable environment to practice meditation, this is really something to celebrate, and feel grateful for. Gratitude has joy in it, and this is a kind of energy we can use in our practice.

Thich Nhat Hanh has a gatha, or meditation poem that begins,

I arrive…
I am home…

When we have a good place to practice, *and we appreciate it deeply*, we are present, with a happiness and ease that isn't there when we overlook our good conditions.

Traditionally, they describe this first factor that supports meditation as external, the rest internal, but it's possible to fully appreciate all the factors that have come together for us to be able to cultivate calm abiding meditation: this place, our good health, our connecting with wise teachers, and this tradition, and having enough resources to engage in a practice. These are not easy to gather together, and so *if we are this fortunate*, we should recognize it, and celebrate all that we have now.

The result of our genuine appreciation is a kind of joy that brings light to the mind, and comfort within. We are awake to what we have and the opportunities to develop states of lasting well being and peace that we can then offer to others, to all living beings, to our whole family.

Joy is an important factor all throughout meditation practice. It can be there in the beginning, as hope, optimism, a sense of adventure; then, once we begin to experience the benefits of meditation, joy increases. It deepens, and as we settle, this light helps us to see clearly. Joy is present, and it arises as a result of all the other factors that we cultivate, as we will see.

I'd like to stay here a while, instead of rushing ahead.

Sometimes the teachings seem as though they would gloss over these fundamental practices, and then quickly go on to describe the details of cultivation. We may miss out on what they offer. These can each be deep practices.

The second and third conditions that support meditation, *having few desires,* and *contentment* are sometimes taught together.

In Buddhism, this world is sometimes called *the desire realm*, which may be a bit misleading, since desire is usually associated with sense desire and gratification. That's only a part of what is intended though when describing this world. I think a better, more accurate translation would be *the realm of dissatisfaction*, since, when I think about it, this contains sense desire, and also ambition, and the feeling of not having enough.

Dissatisfaction always wants *more and better* of whatever we have, so, for example, we may have a car, but we want another, or a better one; we have a house, but we want two; some success, or some food, but we want more, or better. With a dissatisfied mind, we always want something else.

Dissatisfaction is never at rest, and never at peace. It keeps us from being present, and it doesn't let us enjoy what we do have.

The inner factor of *having few desires* directly counters this kind of superficial, discontented movement of the mind and heart. It looks and says, *what I have now is enough, and more than enough.*

There is peace that comes from setting down ambition, and the restlessness of always wanting more, always wanting something different and something better.

In peace, we find there is naturally joy and ease. We also free up energy when we let go of striving to be someplace other than where we are now, and with this energy we can see more fully.

This leads to the factor of *contentment*, which is settled, easeful, and blissful. Contentment can be a deep practice. It's made of being aware of what we have, and of having gratitude, and satisfaction.

We seldom get to see how much energy goes into our thinking about other places we could be, or what we could accomplish in some future time.

When we set these thoughts aside for a while, we free up energy to practice.

In one of his books, Bhante Gunaratana asks, Why is it difficult to practice?, and he goes on to describe the conditions of an ordinary person's mind - one that has craving and jealousy, fear and anger in it. This is like having rocky, poor quality soil. Whatever we would try to plant would have a difficult time taking root and flourishing.

The Tibetan teacher, Choden Rinpoche said,

If we do not assemble conducive conditions, then even if we practice for thousands of years we will not achieve calm abiding.

I was surprised and chastened when I read that, because I can see now how true it is. We waste precious time, exerting ourselves in study and meditation, without gaining a full result, only because we didn't take it a step at a time, laying the foundation and maintaining and increasing those qualities that make a practice successful, like growing a garden.

We have to apply our intelligence and mindfulness to the object of our meditation, be it our breath, or walking, or theme we are contemplating, and these practices make it much easier. They remove the obstacles and impediments to settling down comfortably, with an easy continuity of awareness, and clarity.

One of the things I admire about Buddhism is its emphasis on causality. It says, see for yourself: if you want a certain result, do this first, and then this, and then this. Teachers and generations of practitioners have personally verified what's been taught, and this is what we have received, at its best, in this tradition. We'd be wise to follow the example of those who have accomplished the practice.

Appreciating our fortunate conditions, *having few desires*, and *contentment* all add to our meditation, like streams flowing underground and nourishing the roots of a great tree. If we want to begin, and to continue and mature in meditation, we can start with cultivating these factors, and *then we can care for and continue to nourish them*. Our practice will then certainly flourish!

Just as Rumi said,

The rain soaks the ground,
and the fruit gets juicy…

The fourth factor traditionally listed that supports calm meditation is *having few activities*. This is specifically referencing spiritual, or religious activities, such as reciting prayers and mantras, reading sacred texts, going to see teachers, or listening to talks. All those can be curbed, or let go of for a time, and more energy made available for deeper practice. See for yourself.

Ambitions, even those of a spiritual nature, are tricky to see sometimes, and they can take surprising amounts of energy. Planning has its place, but it can also take us out of the present moment, where we actually learn directly, and can deepen our practice. Setting these other concerns aside for a time comes as a relief, which is pleasurable in and of itself. When we set down the weight of these other activities, *we become lighter.*

When I do this practice of having few activities, I can also let go of what I think of as 'tilting at windmills' - my criticisms of politicians, for example, or what we know as endless, unresolved family dynamics. This is *a practice of non-contention, a practice of peace.* There's a time for everything, and when I can set these aside for a time, then everyone benefits.

We do not need many practices, as so many fine teachers tell us. We need just one or a few that we have an affinity with, and that we can give our whole self to. Then, we may find that *everything is contained in that.*

Maintaining good ethics has always been seen as something we need for meditation, but this isn't widely taught in the West these days. Some teachers would have us believe we can have it all, all our material values, all our callous indifference to others, all our sense indulgences and still have good experiences in meditation. Traditions all say this is not so.

We all need a good moral basis for practice, and this itself is blissful, and easeful. It is comfortable to be in our body and to look within when our conscience is clear. If we transgress, even a hundred thousand times, we can turn again as well as we can to this ethical foundation, as a basis for practice.

It's greatly affirming to hear that only with liberating wisdom are we through with the afflictive emotions and their latent tendencies, or seeds. We may struggle unnecessarily if we don't know this, and instead try to force ourselves to an ideal.

The causes we gather at this point have the aim of supporting meditation, so that we can cultivate *liberating insight*. This is abundantly clear in Buddhist teachings. We use all our positive conditions to cultivate our freedom of mind and heart, at which point right conduct, or ethics come naturally, and are without any contradiction or opposition at all from within. Such is the nature of a sage, of the Founder, and our Noble teachers. This is what we aim for, and skillfully and gradually cultivate ourselves.

The sixth factor traditionally given as fundamental to meditation is *letting go of sense desire*. Tibetan teachings, interestingly enough, often describe this one as *letting go of conceptual thoughts of desire*.

Since we have the second factor above as *having few desires*, we can wonder why this is mentioned again here. The answer, to my mind, is that sense desire is such a big part of most ordinary, uncultivated people's consciousness that it deserves to be singled out in its own category.

I like the way Bhante Gunaratana makes this mental factor of *letting go* accessible. He says we don't have to let go of everything at once, like renouncing all of samsara (unless we organically see the point of that, and then, by all means do so). To make this more inviting, and doable, he teaches, we can just let go of what we can, as a practical means, for a time.

This is blissful all by itself, and it frees up energy and the sense of greater inner space to practice. With not so many thoughts or obsessions about our latest attractions, we are more comfortable, and more present, more complete in ourselves and naturally joyful.

* * *

Thinking about these traditional factors that support meditation has naturally led me to think of a few other causes we can nurture for this dependent-arising, including *having patience, faith, and humility; seeing the great value of calm abiding; cultivating loving kindness and compassion for ourselves and all others, and bodhicitta*. These support whatever practice we do, and bring balanced energy and joy.

Patience is very interesting to watch. It's not something we can just turn on when we practice meditation. Fortunately, we have plenty of opportunities to practice patience in our daily lives. Someone who's in front of us at the market goes too slowly, and we can practice; we need to wait on hold on the phone, and for a minute or two, and we can have patience. Then when we sit with restlessness, or through a foggy state of mind, we have this resource we can draw from, and, it's blissful in a way, something we can benefit from immediately.

Bhante Gunaratana joked that patience should be thought of as the sixth jhanic factor (the first five being initial applications of thought, sustained attention, joy, ease, and one pointedness). Along with the other qualities we bring to bear, patience makes the going more comfortable. There's wisdom in it that way.

Faith is present in all religious traditions for a very good reason. We may sometimes have an epiphany, when all is amazingly clear, and we know without a doubt our own worth, and that of others, and what we should be doing with our lives. At other times, the light of knowing dims, or we get absorbed in the struggle to just get by from day to day.

When it comes to spiritual practice especially, we are led by faith. I define faith as *'the knowledge of things not yet proven',* and it's this knowing on some level that brings peace, long before any result is seen. We meet a teacher, or connect with a lineage, find a spiritual practice or teaching and immediately we know there is a depth of reward waiting, if we follow this path. This is faith. It is a comfort in times of trial, a source of strength and continuity throughout our lives. We are upheld by our faith, and by the divine we connect with in our lives, however we name it.

I pair *humility* with faith because this one virtue keeps us grounded. It holds us back from exalting ourselves over another, on account of the gifts we receive, and the efforts we make.

Humility keeps us learning. There are always those who know more than we do. Witness great teachers and their relationship with their teachers- Geshe Rabten and Trijang Rinpoche, Lama Yeshe and his teachers, for example. No matter how mature they become, how much success and how many students they have, they remain deeply grateful and devoted to their own teachers. It is inspiring to see, and a lesson for us all. They 'hold them on the crown of their head'. Our faith and devotion *need* humility. This quality also lets us see our own faults, and where we still need work. It's essential in the spiritual life.

Seeing the great value of calm abiding meditation very much deserves its own chapter. (See the essay - The Need for Samatha). Understanding its advantages, and giving rise to the motivation to cultivate a clear and serviceable mind come before everything else. This is not something we do only at the beginning of a course of practice, but through reflection, this

factor, seeing the value of samatha, should be generated, tended to, and enhanced further.

A number of teachers have addressed this, but for some unusual reasons, calm abiding is not emphasized these days as much as it should be. The result is predictably that fewer people are liberated, and teaching this as a real possibility. Some teachers have lowered our expectations of what is possible, and by their unethical actions, addictions and predations, they show what happens when this great lineage of practice instruction is neglected.

We need samatha calm abiding to empower wisdom, for our own liberation, and so that we can benefit others in lasting ways. It's said that,

C*oncentration fortified with virtue brings great benefits and great fruits; understanding fortified with concentration brings great benefits and great fruits…*

As Geshe Sopa said, *samatha is the foundation for liberation from samsara.*

We may have times when the afflictive emotions are not manifest. If we're studying and practicing a spiritual path, we may even think we are enlightened, or free forever from all confusion and difficulties. For someone who hasn't completed the path, what happens is that the latent tendencies that are still present in the mind in time manifest again, and again there is the suffering of the six realms. Such is samsara, the cycle of repeated suffering and dissatisfaction.

The Buddha did not teach a path that only leads to a temporary pause in the afflictions, *but one that leads to the remainderless cessation of suffering*. Their cause is removed by insight, empowered by the strength of meditation. When this is clearly recognized, the motivation to begin to gather and maintain a wealth of positive conditions, and to apply ourselves to practice, and to continue until we get a full result comes naturally.

Metta, or *loving kindness* also supports calm abiding meditation beautifully. This may not be apparent for someone who hasn't yet cultivated this practice, but it becomes clear very soon. Bhante Gunaratana suggests beginning each session of jhana practice with metta meditation. How wonderful. When we practice metta, the mind becomes joyful, bright and clear, and it settles down comfortably . It's said that *'In the mind of happiness, attention finds a true foundation.'*

Compassion deserves special attention whenever we talk about Buddhist practice. The reason we practice Buddhism is that we don't want to suffer, and we don't want our loved ones to suffer.

The most fundamental teaching in Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths: that unenlightened living is suffering; that its cause is ignorance; that all suffering can be ended, and there is a path to accomplish this aim, one that can free ourselves and others from suffering and its causes.

This compassion can be a powerful force in our practice of meditation. It can give us courage and strength, and empower us to move through any obstacles.

Great love and compassion, with understanding, then lead naturally lead to *bodhicitta*, which is the aim to awaken and free ourselves so we can benefit others in the best possible way. We can see that without knowing and embodying liberation, there's only so much we can do. All other solutions to problems are temporary, at best.

When we have this beautiful and profound bodhicitta awake in us, meditation is clear and bright and joyful. However much we can do is deeply satisfying.

I'm sure if others study what supports their ease of meditation they would find plenty they could develop, and draw from. This is just what I've personally found to be most helpful.

These are more than just prerequisites. As much as we cultivate these factors, we find their power and clarity are present in the calm, quiet walking and sitting meditation that we do.

We are all invited to try these ideas out for ourselves and see what is personally most satisfying and effective.

May all beings have peace and joy,
and may all beings be liberated

Nutriments for Meditation

Homage to all Ancestral Teachers

In order for the mind to be strong, and for us to meditate with a feeling of ease, certain factors have to be present. If they are not, we may make efforts, and feel opposed, internally, like we are moving against a stream, or going uphill. It's more efficient to cultivate the causes that support meditation. These elements can then be recognized as part of meditation itself.

Two things the conceptual mind does: it fixates, and, it creates the appearance of things being separate when they are not really separate from one another.

In Bhante Gunaratana's teachings, he makes it clear though that the loving kindness and letting go (nekkhama) we cultivate *continue* when we then engage the mind in meditation, whether it be on the breath, or walking, or a theme for contemplation.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his commentary on In The Buddha's Words, describes a number of other factors spoken of in The Gradual Training that support meditation. These are:

ethics

contentment

sense restraint

and

mindfulness and clear comprehension

The benefit of pointing out how these help and foster meditation is that the connection is then very clear between the presence or absence of these qualities and the mind we bring to practice.

It is just as Ajahn Pasanno said, *the qualities of mind and heart we cultivate in our daily lives are what we bring to meditation.*

Keeping good ethics brings 'the bliss of blamelessness', and we naturally feel comfortable, and at ease. Ethics is a continual practice, and so we can feel we are promoting the cause of sound meditation also when we are not engaged in formal practice;

Contentment is being satisfied with what we have, and feeling like it is enough is another whole life practice that brings ease. It directly counters the restlessness and greed that is one of the root delusions.

Contentment also naturally gives rise to gratitude, and to joy. When we are really aware of our good fortune, it brings light and stability to the mind;

For lay people in the 21st century *sense restraint* is probably the least appreciated support for meditation. In a consumer society, everything is oriented outwards, and fashioned to engage and to excite the senses. The aim is to sell, as if there were anything deep or lasting in sating ourselves! On the contrary, chasing one object after another and over indulging only dissipates and dulls the mind.

The skill of sense restraint may seem like a small thing on the surface- after all, it's merely withdrawing the mind for a time from whatever it's attached to, but this very same ability, when developed even a little, leads to a greater ease with interiority. By that much more, the mind is unhindered.

Mindfulness and clear comprehension then counter distraction, and a lack of purpose. Cultivating *mindfulness* in daily life- *the continuity of awareness*- brings more fullness and joy to living, and it also has the result of creating

greater energy and clarity; and with clear comprehension, as Lama Yeshe said, *we know what we are doing, and why we are doing it.*

Practicing any or all of these, even for a short while brings a result that really is noticeable when we meditate. You can see this for yourself.

One more quality that Bhikkhu Bodhi points out when speaking of the Gradual Path is that of *equanimity*. He refers to a line that's found in the Sutra on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, where it says that one dwells

ardent, clearly aware and mindful,

having set aside attachment and aversion in regard to the world…

{or, alternatively,

having set aside longing and dejection with regards to the world…}

This quality, of equanimity, has many wonderful benefits. When we take it up as something to study and observe carefully in our life, these become clear. Here I will only mention a few, keeping with the theme of the nutriments of meditation.

First, having equanimity in the sense of neither seeking sense gratification nor holding aversion calms the mind right away. There are many opportunities for applying this factor, we will find, from morning 'till night, and the effect of using this skill- the peace and balance it brings, then continues for a time. This is noticeable;

As with letting go, and having patience, *being equanimous*- even minded, and unshakable ahead of time towards the outcomes of meditation opens up space for whatever we will experience. We may have had a good meditation in the past, and then perhaps today our mind is less clear, or

settled. With equanimity, we are present oriented, and we meet, and can even warmly welcome all our different states as they arise. This is how we can learn, and care for ourselves.

Generally, equanimity is a great support for all the changes and challenges we meet in life- conditions at work, or in relationships, finances, health, and so on. We can say that equanimity here is another word for peace, and it nourishes our meditation, and wisdom.

This same quality of strength and balance of mind we can develop over the course of our lives then applies inwardly, in a more subtle way. It steadies the mind and heart.

Each of these factors support and sustain meditation, and as the importance of meditation becomes more clear, and it becomes more central to our life, it will be easier to then cherish and continue to cultivate these qualities.

Samadhi

About 15 years ago someone asked me the meaning of samadhi, and I couldn't answer him right away, at least not to my satisfaction, but then the sense of it dawned in me and I could describe it more fully and accurately. I've had a few more thoughts on this subject over the years that I'd also like to share.

Samadhi is a state of mind that has certain qualities. It is *clear and bright, peaceful,* and *blissful*. Each of these elements can be further described to bring out the meaning.

When we say that our awareness is *clear*, then it is sharp, and precise; it sees fully, and enters into an experience;

being *peaceful* at the same time, we are stable and settled, and not restless at all; we are without dispersion or wandering, and this inner quiet, or tranquility is very enjoyable, and at times deeply restorative;

and that this state is described as *blissful* means that there is a more subtle kind of pleasure in it.

The teachings on self cultivation say that enjoyment arises in meditation because of the mind's *purity.* At that time, we are 'secluded from' the five hindrances: anger, craving for sense pleasure, dullness, distraction, and doubt. In some schools, these are called 'vexations' or 'afflictive emotions', which opens them up to include also such factors as fear and sadness. These are absent in samadhi, and so the feeling is naturally one of peace and pleasure.

One teacher from the Theravada tradition, Bhante Punnaji, described samadhi as, 'the unification of mind'.

In Buddhism, we find two traditions that offer detailed instructions on samadhi. In the Theravada, there are teachers, such as Ajahn Lee and Ajahn Brahm who offer instructions on the jhanas, and in the Tibetan tradition, various lineages outline methods for cultivating what they call shinay, or shamatha. See Gen Lamrimpa's excellent book, Calming the Mind for a detailed treatment of this subject.

In shamatha, we are aiming to cultivate a state that is free from both gross and subtle dullness and distraction. We begin wherever we are, and apply the antidotes to these, bringing more energy, and mindfulness, and calm, as needed.

The basis of jhana, shinay, or meditation is always ethics. When we're living a decent, virtuous life, considerate, not harming or cheating others, being truthful and sober, it's easy to settle comfortably, and with a clear mind.

In the same way, when we cultivate metta, loving kindness, we are keeping good ethics, are careful, and naturally joyful. This supports whatever meditation we would do.

The aim of the different approaches is the same - that of a mind that is clear and bright, that has a settled, easy continuity of awareness, and that is flexible, and serviceable, as in - able to be used for any purpose. They call this process taming the mind, resulting in *pliancy* in the language of the shamatha teachings. We can then use it in any way we like.

'Without Jhana, there is no Wisdom'

Some teachers and traditions cultivate this state to the point called 'access concentration' where there's just enough peace and clarity to take up wisdom practice, liberating the mind. Others take the practice further, with the aim of strengthening the mind before developing insight. In both cases though, the need for these qualities of mind is recognized, unequivocally.

Early translators of the word samadhi used the common term ‘concentration’ which may be fine for someone familiar with meditation practice, but misleading for newcomers. The connotations are of a state that’s somewhat tight, or effortful, and that doesn’t reflect the richness of the word, or experience. There is some overlap though, that can be noted, once this fuller understanding of samadhi, or states of calm, blissful continuity of clear, vivid, awareness is there.

Samadhi or right meditation enables a person naturally to enter deeply into an object, or theme of study or contemplation. This only makes sense, when we think about it. If our mind is wandering, or jumping from one thought to another when we’re trying to study, the result is quite different than it is when settled and clear. Sometimes the word jhana is translated as absorption, and we can see why that is.

Take for example, reflections on the value of patience. We can feel the meaning of the word more fully, immersing ourselves in it, and enjoying it. If we’re with the experience only 10% of the time in meditation, then the experience is diluted so much. Being half with the subject and only half of the time away is better; and being completely with our theme, certainly, even better.

Or take the example of cultivating metta, loving kindness. When we are clear and calm, awake and comfortably present with the experience, it is a bright and beautiful state of mind, one that is healing, and rejuvenating. Compared to being distracted, this is far different. The experience is richer and much more powerful.

We can also unfold, or manifest the qualities of meditation, and this is where we get the plural in our traditions, of *samadhis.* All the qualities that are represented in Buddhist art, of universal compassion, or wisdom, or healing can be developed when we make use of this kind of mind in our cultivation. Whatever state or virtue we would develop in ourselves, samadhi is fundamental to them all.

The Buddhism of Scholars or of Meditators - Choose Wisely

Ideas or insights are like seeds, and meditation is like sunlight and rain that enables them to grow well and flourish. We've received such treasures, and it's up to us to take full advantage for ourselves and all our loved ones.

There are those who would study Buddhism or religion without cultivating samadhi, but the result is then very different compared to someone who has even a basic meditation practice. Often books are written, and talks given, comparing this idea with that, arguing for this approach, denigrating that one, but the words are dry, and we can easily imagine how people can be misled by their opinions, and traditions can become derailed. Thank heavens that we have people, men and women through the generations who have kept these teachings viable!

Not all teachers use terms such as jhana, samadhi, or shinay or shamatha, but we can see the results of what they encourage. For example, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Thai Forest teachers, such as Ajaan Chah simply teach meditation methods that bring the same qualities of clarity, peace and enlivening, subtle joy, that are then the basis for cultivating inner freedom. This is the fruit of Buddhist practice, and the best gift we can demonstrate and encourage in one another.

Through practicing the path,
May we all understand this mind of ours,
it's potential and noble qualities
and share our health, joy and peace, with all our family,
all species, and all the world!

I offer this essay, and the one that follows on discernment so that we have a clear idea from the beginning of the kind of mind we are aiming to cultivate. Although the subjects of learning in general and liberating wisdom are mentioned, I would like to introduce the purpose of meditation as well as I can early on, so that we understand its purpose, and can orient ourselves, and progress.

* * *

To know when one is really on the right track, the mind should be extremely relaxed, extremely spacious but absolutely poised, absolutely awake and vivid, the awareness should be very clear as if for the first time you have woken up.

- Ani Tenzin Palmo

* * *

I can imagine hundreds of thousands, or millions of people living balanced lives, and becoming their best selves. Whatever else this world and our lives will be, this much is attainable, and this much I can aim to encourage as much as I can.

What comes first

There is something that comes before all other contemplation, that if it is lacking whatever time and energy is spent in studying is as good as wasted. I'm referring here to a clarity of mind that grasps what's being talked about, and that can understand it and make connections with our own life, at least to some extent. If we are not moved inwardly by what we hear or read, then something essential is missing.

What they call 'clarity' in the Tibetan traditions of meditation, both in their calm abiding teachings, as well as in the Nature of Mind teachings and practice has more to do with *the subjective experience of knowing* than it does with having a visual experience of clarity, such as a clear image, or a clear day. Clarity in that tradition can be equated with what in the South East Asian Buddhist tradition they call *sampasamjanna,* or clear comprehension. Sometimes the compound term sati-sampajanna, or mindfulness and clear comprehension, is used. Buddhadhasa Bhikku calls sampasamjanna 'Wisdom in action', to make it apparent that this is our intelligence functioning through our day and our lives.

In the parable of the sower, the bible talks about the different qualities of mind we can have: there can be rocky soil, where almost nothing can grow; there can be better conditions for planting, and there can also be the most fertile kind of ground. The deep truth of the story is that we can make our mind more amenable to learning, and retaining what we have learned. Calm abiding teachings call this *making the mind serviceable*.

When I am lacking clarity of mind, I know it is what needs to come first. So how to develop this quality?

Using the breath I

At times, dullness comes from overusing the mind, and so balance, resting and refreshing ourselves and recovering our energy, is part of developing our basic clarity. For a time placing our mind on the the sensation of breathing in and out, with an awareness of the body, and with goodwill towards ourselves can calm our activity.

Ajahn Chah said:

Strengthening the mind is not done by making it move around, as is done to strengthen the body, but by bringing it to a halt, bringing it to rest.

Using the breath I I

Sometimes it's only when we slow down and stop that we get to see just how active we have been. The breath then has remarkable qualities that can be known and made use of. Practicing what Ajaan Lee calls '*saturating our body with good breath energy*' rejuvenates the cells in our body, and brings light and joy to the mind. This is one kind of meditation anyone can do. It only takes regular practice, and seeing its importance.

Patience and being skillful

Being skillful is about seeing ahead of time the possible or probable results of our actions, or our taking a break and resting. Having a skillful mind is one of the ways our intelligence can function, and this includes memory, and patience, and a good measure of self confidence.

Nourishing ourselves with joy

Nourishment is another aspect that I know I cannot neglect, if I'm to have a strong mind. By nourishment here I mean intellectual and spiritual food, joy and inspiration that reaches deep into the body and mind. I receive this

via music and art, children and family, and from the natural world. These blessings make the mind more and more capable. With this kind of sustenance, well fortified, we bring out the minds full strength.

Freshness is a mind that is able to receive knowledge, beauty, and meaning and make connections with our own life. This is what I wish for myself, naturally, and for all others, so they too are able to learn, and make the most of their precious lives.

The Nature of Discernment

Discriminating wisdom and discursive thought are not the same…

Discriminating, critical intelligence is usually associated with discursive conceptual thought, but when it comes to meditative practice, they are different. Following certain lines of thought and investigation *can* indeed bring out this sharp quality of mind that sees deeply into phenomena, but thought by itself is not discerning intelligence, otherwise, the more we thought, the more this quality would always come through, and this is not the case. In fact, sometimes too much thinking can fatigue and dull the mind. So what is the quality we would cultivate?, and how is this done?

The nature of discernment is an incisive acuity of perception. It is the manifest power of the mind to see precisely into what is looked into.

This quality of mind is what distinguishes someone who directly realizes a teaching, and gains the benefit of it, from someone who is only a scholar or an intellectual. In studying the Dharma, it is this awakened intelligence that is brought out and applied, as evaluation and investigation into self and phenomena. This results in insight - *vipassana* - seeing clearly and freeing the mind through these methods, as compared with merely knowing about them, so this difference is vitally important.

Discernment is developed by settled, quiet meditation, done patiently and attentively over a period of time, when the mind gradually becomes bright and clear on deeper levels; it is cultivated by using rational thought, and following expositions and reasoning; and it is developed by fully understanding and consciously cultivating the different ways we have of knowing, with the intellect, and with the heart. This goes in the direction of full knowledge, whereas rational intelligence alone would be partial.

Whenever there is liberating wisdom, discernment is functioning. Both the methods that make use of discursive thought, and the non-conceptual

methods arrive at this same point. These are surely truths we should see for ourselves.

The Unified Path of Ethics, Meditation, and Wisdom

The Buddha taught a single, integrated path of ethical discipline, meditation, and wisdom, leading to liberation from suffering. This was his whole purpose in teaching. We may select one or a few practices from traditions in isolation, but whether they complete the function he intended depends on whether each of these elements are present, and active, and able to fulfill their respective roles, organically.

We divide these three - ethics, meditation, and wisdom - when we use language, but we find they are seamlessly integrated in practice.

Ani Tenzin Palmo used the example of building a monastery to explain the importance of ethics. She said that the foundations of a temple don't look particularly glamorous. No one comes around saying how impressed they are with the long, difficult work of making sure the underlying structure is strong, and the drainage well designed, but these are in fact essential, and that becomes apparent later, when the whole work is supported.

In the same way, ethics underlies good, solid meditation. As with metta - loving kindness, the mind is made clear by this accessible, everyday practice, and the mind settles easily and comfortably when it is free of remorse and agitation.

We can find this out for ourselves when we practice, or we can take the advice of our wise elders, and start off well.

The Dalai Lama has written that

The three higher trainings refer to moral discipline, meditative concentration, and wisdom. The first of these, the training in moral discipline is said to be the basis of the other trainings and the foundation of all perfections.

and

By the power of constantly relying on alertness and awareness of practice and abandonments, discipline becomes an excellent collection of causes for the quick and easy accomplishment of concentration.

Ethics, we can say, is the wisdom of our feeling nature, and this is something even children understand well. It's so universal to our human experience in fact that we may overlook its importance, and development, but all that we would accomplish, spiritually, for ourselves and others depends on this.

In their pride, far too often already, teachers and students of Buddhism here in the West have undervalued right conduct, with disastrous results. Even leaving aside the cultivation of wisdom, they set the whole tradition back through their arrogance and carelessness.

There's a saying, that

If you pull the corner of a carpet, the whole carpet moves

and when we take up the practice of clear, calm meditation, quieting and directing the mind, we find actually that ethics and wisdom are necessarily, and organically, a part of it. Ethics allows us to go beyond the initial stages in meditation, and wisdom is facilitated, or is naturally revealed through practice.

Bhante Gunaratana has taught that

Beginning with morality, any layman can practice jhana (single pointed meditation). Practicing the five precepts provides a strong, powerful moral base. First we practice morality, and then mindfulness and clear comprehension…

and

As we practice meditation, mindfulness and clear comprehension, seeing things as they are, naturally develop. Because of this, we can say that tranquility and insight are in essence not two different processes.

Ethics precedes meditation, and meditation is the essential ground for the wisdom that uproots the defilements.

When the mind is qualified, that is the time we make use of it; When the iron is hot- hammer it, to shape it; When the knife is sharp- use it; Similarly, when the mind is clear, pure and strong- use it. That is the concentration we have to use to practice vipassana - liberating insight…

Fulfilling the Buddha's intent, insight brings freedom from suffering that was based on a wrong view, of ourselves, and others and our world. This is what we realize in practice.

When we see the value of ethics, we'll care for it well in all our lives. The mind then becomes clear, and wisdom develops, with greater sensitivity to the preciousness of all life.

Let us proceed then, from wherever we are in our lives, cultivating the ground of ethics, our meditation, and wisdom, with great compassion for ourselves and for all others, aiming for that ultimate freedom of mind and heart, and the dedicated service to all.

Getting the Proportions Right in Our Own Personal Dharma Practice

If we want to prepare a delicious, healthy meal for ourselves and our family, our friends and neighbors, first we need to gather all the necessary ingredients, and then put them together in just the right way.

In the same way, to get the best results from Buddhist practice, we need to gather certain factors together, and then use them together in a way that is most effective for us personally.

Seeing that we have good causes and conditions at this time is really something to celebrate, but by themselves, these are not enough. We need to take full advantage of this precious opportunity that we have now. This is the time to practice with these different factors in just the right amount to match our own unique needs.

Ethics, meditation, study, and contemplation,
a connection to realized beings, loving kindness and compassion,
the purification of faults, joy and ease

- all of these work together towards a single aim -
that of liberation, and being able to help others in the best possible ways.

Finding the right balance - a few examples

When it comes to Dharma practice, there's no 'one size fits all'. It's up to each of us to understand our own mind, and then to practice as necessary to realize a full result.

For some, this can mean more time spent meditating quietly, calming and clarifying the mind, increasing the continuity of attention, and the powers of mindfulness and discernment in that way;

for others, it can mean more study and reflection, using our rational side, and bringing out that keen edge of awareness, so that, when we meditate quietly the result is a greater depth of insight;

for some, it can mean focussing on purification;

and for some it can mean more time given to all the heart practices that brighten the mind, and bring joy and strength, and highlight the wisdom of our feeling nature.

Generally speaking, for dharma practice to be effective here in the West, in the 21st century, I'm sure that we need quite a bit of calm abiding practice. This is something that is not emphasized as much as it should be, and so I'll say it here plainly, by way of encouragement. So much is at stake for ourselves, and close ones, and for our world at this time.

The result of not having the different Dharma factors in balance is that our cultivation does not produce the freedom and ease that it could. The potential is there, but it's not yet manifest. Especially in the West, too much intellectualization is a hindrance to meditators. It is difficult at times to counter our habitual tendencies, but in this case this is just what we need to do.

Proportion

As for examples of more time spent meditating, and cultivating the qualities of samatha or jhana, before changing the emphasis to insight practice:

We can practice an hour or two of quiet sitting and walking meditation before any study, and again during and after the session of reading and reflection.

Or we can practice for the entire morning, or half the day, and only then take up study and reflection;

We can also choose to spend a day, or a weekend, or a week, or months, when we are focussing on quieting and clarifying the mind first with sitting and walking meditation, producing a good foundation, before turning to cultivating liberating wisdom with additional study and rational thought.

The Wat Pa Tam Wua Thai Forest Monastery teaches that, especially for those inclined to inquiry *make sure you keep up Samatha practice as well. It is essential in order to keep the mind fresh and powerful enough to walk the path of wisdom well.*

At some point, as some lineages teach, these two kinds of meditation, concentration and insight, may merge, and it is then one single practice.

See for yourself what works best for you.

To know our own particular nature so that we can practice effectively is not something we do just once, rather it's a dynamic balance, from day to day, month to month, and year to year.

Sometimes we will know what we need ahead of time, and at other times, we need to experiment, or perhaps fail again in our approach, and suffer and struggle and then learn from it. Looking at the results of how we have practiced, when we've calmed down a bit and have some perspective, we can analyze, and adjust as needed.

All these factors that contribute to awakening work together: kindness and compassion for ourselves and all beings, and a basic method that cultivates calm and clarity and a full presence of mind are all necessary parts of a functional path.

Any of the essential factors can be lacking so it's up to us to see what works. Our teachers can guide us, but ultimately we are responsible. This is the way practice works.

{I include the following comments on a Traditional teaching by a modern day teacher because of it's usefulness in many contexts, but especially here. These are principles we can recognize, and apply, creating an effective practice.}

The Four Bases of Success, by Ajahn Pasanno

From the talk The Khandas are not Self

There's a set of teachings that the Buddha gives, which are actually called The Four Bases of Success, and that's both spiritual success, as well as worldly success.

In the Pali language, *chanda, virya, citta, vimamsa* - it's a common teaching, and *chanda* is like, desire… And you think, Desire?, I thought the Buddha said you can't have desire (laughs) The Buddha said desire was the cause of suffering! - well, he did, but the word that he used is *tanha.*

The word *tanha* is desire that is always associated with greed, hatred, and delusion, and it's always going to end up in suffering.

Whereas *chanda* is more of a neutral term. It can be unskillful, or it can be very wholesome, in the sense of like, *dhamma-chanda*, desire for truth, desire for dhamma; *kusala-chanda*: desire for the wholesome, desire for the good; Chanda on its own, in a wholesome sense, or positive sense is motivation.

How do we skillfully motivate ourselves?

How do we keep, and sustain an interest?

The function of desire is being interested in something, because whatever we start to get bored with, or fed up with, we lose interest, we lose motivation.

And then the second quality is *virya*, which means effort, or energy. Without that motivation, without that desire, then it's hard to apply effort, and energy.

So, whether one is a student, or one's working, or one's engaged in the world of our relationships around us, it takes interest and motivation, it takes effort to be able to look after the aspects that are wholesome and positive to do that.

The third quality is *citta,* which means the mind that is well established; the mind that's not confused, and scattered, and all messed up. So, looking after a clear, and steady mind, heart, a heart of well being.

And the last quality is *vimamsa,* which is… it's kind of like, investigation, reflection, but it also has the connotation of reviewing. So, one is recollecting, reflecting, investigating, but also reviewing, What were the results? How did that work? What was useful about that? What *wasn't?* What *didn't* work? What did work?

So those are qualities that we need to be cultivating, whether we are desiring worldly success, or spiritual success - those are wholesome qualities that are necessary to be cultivating.

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 the 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.

Encouragement

I.

There's a range of how we can be towards ourselves when we sit down to meditate, or practice walking meditation. One choice is that we can be a very good friend to ourselves, gentle, and loving, and warmly encouraging, much like a grandparent or a kind teacher would be. When we do this we can see and feel the results right away. This makes our practice so much easier.

In the Jewish tradition, I've heard, they say there's an angel leaning over every blade of grass, whispering, *grow!*, *grow!*, and it's this kind of divine love we offer ourselves and each other every time we are gently and affectionately encouraging. It's a gift we can delight in.

II.

From 'Using the Anapanasati Sutta to Cultivate Shinay'

Unless we're already accomplished, when we first sit down to meditate, we will find dullness and distraction. That's just the way it is. It's universal. If we know this with some humility from the very beginning, we'll then be able to accommodate what is actually going on, instead of reaching for an ideal, and rejecting our own experience.

The practice of meditation gradually removes these two factors, of dullness and distraction, so that the mind becomes clear and is able to easily and comfortably stay with its object.

III.

I recall reading something from the Indian Sage Swami Sivananda where he said, 'If you have a hundred thoughts, try to make them 90 - that way you will progress…', and I thought of adapting this to my own mind, telling myself 'If you have a thousand thoughts, try to make them 900…', gently and gradually becoming even a little more collected. Even this much is really good. It's very naturally onward leading. And what's more - *this much is do-able. (Ha!)*

Instead of aiming for an ideal, and feeling discouraged, or comparing today's meditation to how it was yesterday, or an hour ago, we can meet ourselves right where we are just now, realistically, with clear eyes. We can practice with warmth, and ease, and enthusiasm.

IV.

Ringu Tulku offered this wisdom: He said that, if we are thinking and feeling 'I'm not a good meditator', or, 'I should be able to meditate with more clarity, or for longer periods of time' - that is just our pride. On some level we are thinking, I should be able to do this already. Instead, we should have the humility to start from where we are just now, and to go from there.

V.

Abandon all harmful, negative actions, no matter how small;
and accomplish all positive actions, no matter now small…

- Lama Zopa Rinpoche

If at first, whether you succeed or not, try, try again…

Part III. Calm abiding

16. A Concise Verse Summary of the Practice of Calm Abiding Meditation

An Introduction to the Calm Abiding Teachings

I would like to give you a gift.

I first came across the Tibetan Buddhist teachings on *shamatha*, or calm abiding in the early 1990's, in books on the Stages of the Path. They are a part of a bodhisattva's training, someone who is working on liberating themselves and others, according to the Buddhist teachings. We're not able to fully benefit others until we understand suffering and its causes, and have freed our own mind. So deep and clear meditation is an integral part of this path, dedicated to peace in the world, to all our loved ones, and all beings.

When I first read these teachings on meditation, I saw right away that they were more thorough and detailed than any I had heard before.

My main practice has been mindfulness of breathing, as taught by Thich Nhat Hanh, which is based on the Anapanasati Sutta. That Sutta describes bringing awareness to the breath and progressively calming the body, feelings, and mind. This makes the mind clear and serviceable, ready for inquiry.

I won't go into details on the practice of this Sutta here, but will instead recommend Thich Nhat Hanh's commentary, called The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing, later published as Breathe, You Are Alive!, and Ajahn Pasanno's online retreat talks on this Sutta, from 2005. See also the teachings of Ajahn Lee, in particular his Keeping the Breath in Mind, and Inner Strength.

See also the essay titled 'Using the Anapanasati Sutta to Cultivate Shinay', earlier in this volume.

Although I'd not seen calm abiding applied to this way of practicing meditation, I could find the qualities they were describing in my own practice, and this is what I write about in the following pages.

You know, a person can study teachings such as these for a long time before finding how to actually apply them. A turning point came for me on retreat in 2012, when I had the time and space to look at my own experience and identify what was going on. I hope others have the same opportunity, of time to practice, together with clear instructions.

As with many Tibetan teachings, there are these lists that are commented on, and they can seem dry and pedantic at first, until we hear them presented in a way we can relate to, and see what they are talking about in our own experience.

Traditional presentations of the Calm Abiding teachings list:

Six preconditions for practice

Five faults and eight antidotes

Nine stages of calm abiding -

Perhaps you've seen a diagram that shows these stages. There is a man following after an elephant going up a path. At first he is chasing the elephant, with a rope; a monkey and a rabbit make their appearance, and gradually the man tames the elephant, as he makes progress. Geshe Rabten has a description of what this diagram represents this online, as I recall, in Teachings from Tibet;

and finally there are the Six Powers and Four Kinds of Attention - the tools we use.

I have come to see these teachings as one of the great spiritual treasures of humanity, our inherited legacy, passed down to us by generations of wise and loving teachers. Surprisingly, these days not many people write or speak about samatha. It's rarely taught at Tibetan centers, and, among Western teachers, only Alan Wallace that I know of features these teachings. His translation of Calming the Mind, by Gen Lamrimpa, and Geshe Sopa's volume on Samatha are two full length books on the subject. *They are to be praised, and cherished. These are teachings that can benefit our whole lives.*

I would suggest having a basic method of meditation that works for you somewhat before studying detailed descriptions of how to practice, such as those on samatha, or the jhanas. That way, you'll have a reference point in your own meditations, and something to work with, and these won't become just an intellectual study. They are meant to deepen our practice.

May it be this way for all of us.

May all beings benefit.

Notes from three teachers - on keeping the mind clear and bright in meditation

{Note: As soon as we begin to meditate, we'll see the tendencies of our own mind to either dullness, or distraction and scattering. Personally, my bigger challenge has always been sinking, sleepiness or dullness, and so over the years I have done as much walking meditation as sitting meditation, especially while on retreat. Please note that subtle dullness especially can be a trap. We may think we are meditating well, but habituated to that state without vividness, we won't make the progress that we could, and a lot of time can go by without a good result. Here are three teachers on the importance of maintaining, and cultivating clarity in practice. *I introduce this here to encourage good habits from the beginning*.}

In meditation, when laxity and excitement appear in their most subtle form, you must at once stop them from developing further, and remove them altogether. If you neglect to do so and instead downplay them because of their subtlety, regarding them as unimportant, your concentration will be faulty.

- taken from the Gomchen Lam Rim

Ani Tenzin Palmo, from her commentary on Atisha's Verses:

It's very important that in meditation the mind is not only relaxed, but extremely alert - it's like waking up - it's not going to sleep;

and so the mind should be more clear, more aware, more absolutely - *bright* - while all the other faculties of the mind rest, and stay quiet…

Ajahn Pasanno, from his commentaries on the Anapanasati Sutta:

As the mind becomes more settled, the awareness and mindfulness has to be *more sharp*, has to be more clear.

* * *

We cultivate the stillness of the mind in order to energize the mind, in order to brighten it and allow it to be more clear. Then we have to learn to utilize that clarity and stay with an object, to be able to sustain attention on a characteristic with the mind of steadiness, and that's where penetration occurs, and the ability for the mind to really drop some of its preoccupations and basic attachments.

* * *

It's important to just relax in meditation, and let the awareness work. And obviously, that's a qualified statement, in the sense that it's not just about relaxing, it's relaxing in order that the awareness can actually function, *awareness can really come to the fore of our experience.*

* * *

* When the mind starts to settle, and things start to quiet down a little bit, you know, it's not always a good thing, in the sense that, if one doesn't sustain the attention, if one doesn't apply effort, then it very quickly shifts into dullness, very easily. Dullness, sloth and torpor, lassitude of mind result if the mind is not taking interest. It's particularly applying that quality of *'filling, drenching, steeping, and pervading'* the body with the awareness of the breath, that really helps to dispel that lassitude of mind that goes down into dullness.

And when the mind goes into dullness, the mind loses its brightness. So, to take awareness using attention, not just to focus and hold on the breath, but to allow that awareness to move, flowing into the body with the breath, the sensation of the breath, paying attention to the subtlety of sensation, you know, what does it feel like in the different places of the body? and that

moving of awareness around the body, so that the body is energized, and therefore the mind becomes energized.

It's when the mind and body are energized in that way that it can settle in a way that's very stable, without slipping into sloth and torpor.

(In this way) When we practice we are using the body as a foundation, and using feeling as a foundation for experiencing the different aspects of what is happening within the mind.

* * *

Mindfulness is not a static quality of just being mindful of a fixed thing, a fixed attention. There's a dynamic quality that is investigating, is scrutinizing, is weighing the benefits or the drawbacks; there's a sense of recognition of time and place, the situation that one's in, so that there is this characteristic of non-confusion, a function of investigation, manifesting as scrutiny. These are the characteristics of *sampajanna,* clear comprehension.

Particularly in meditation it's very necessary to have that quality because you're always needing to make slight adjustments. When we're paying attention to the breath, we're always needing to be making slight adjustments, either to the meditation object, or the degree of effort that we're putting in, or the balancing of our investigation, as opposed to the degree of calmness… so that there's this sense that you're always needing to make slight adjustments, in order to find a point of balance.

And this is one of the functions of mindfulness, but in its aspect of sampajanna, clear comprehension.

` * * *

Engaging the Mind

The hindrance of sleepiness, drowsiness, dullness - is not just sleepiness, it's like *a stiffness* of the mind, *a turgid quality* of the mind; there's *a heaviness*, the mind *sinks*…

And again, that's where learning how to lift up attention to the meditation, learning how how to lift up energy, giving oneself to the meditation (is useful) -

Often what happens, that leads to dullness, is when one sits down and waits for the mind to be peaceful, then you just fall asleep, or go into a state of dullness, because *you have to engage* in the meditation, you have to engage in the training of the mind. You have to engage skillfully, because without that, then the tendency is just sort of to drift… and you drift for a while, then you sink. That's what happens with the mind.

So learn how *to engage attention*, and encourage the mind to take this interest in a simple object, and to sustain it.

* * *

A Pleasant Abiding Here and Now

It rejuvenates and freshens the mind to be peaceful, and to be settled. It's a realistic goal to be setting for oneself - 'How do I abide peacefully, pleasantly, in the here and now, with these states of consciousness that are very positive, very bright, and very settled…'

Whatever attempt we make toward that is bearing fruit. It is the inherent benefit of turning the mind to that which is peaceful. To whatever degree the mind is able to settle, and be still, whatever steps along the way we make, those are very fruitful, very beneficial. They give us the opportunity to really experience peace and well being.

Notes on the Two Kinds of Distraction, from the teachings of Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and Gen Lamrimpa

From The Six Perfections

The texts explain that we first have a realization of calm abiding; we are able to concentrate single-pointedly, totally free from attachment–scattering thought, which is *göpa* in Tibetan, and sinking thought or dullness, which is *jingwa* in Tibetan. Only when we are totally free from these subtle obstacles can we concentrate single-pointedly.

I use the term *attachment–scattering thought* to differentiate it from just (distraction) scattering thought, which is *towa* in Tibetan.

When we are focused on an object of meditation and our mind wanders to another object- either a nonvirtuous one, such as the desire for food, or even a virtuous one, such as thinking of the Buddha- that is towa. When the mind stays in meditation but moves from the object we should be concentrating on to another object of meditation, such as another deity, then that is göpa. Although it might still be a strong, focused meditation, it is considered attachment– scattering thought and an obstacle to our meditation.

* * *

A useful distinction

{When the mind moves away from its object due to sense desire, in the teachings that is called *excitement*; when it moves to another object for another reason, that is called *scattering*.}

The following is from the book, Samatha Meditation, also published as Calming the Mind, by Gen Lamrimpa:

When the mind is stable, it is not subject to scattering and excitement.

{From the glossary:

Excitement is a state of mind that occurs when one focuses upon a desirable object with which one is previously acquainted, causing the mind to be drawn outwards (away from its object), and,

scattering is mental turbulence not originating from attachment}

Scattering is a mental factor that is similar to excitement, yet there are distinctions between the two. Excitement, by its very definition, is something that draws attention away from the object of meditation by the force of attachment, craving, and lust.

Scattering also draws the attention away from the object, but it is not necessarily propelled by attachment. It may be propelled by some virtuous topic or may be conjoined with some other mental distortion apart from attachment.

(for example, there can be)

scattering conjoined with pride, with anger, jealousy, laziness, and many others.

In addition, if thoughts of bodhichitta, meditation on emptiness, thoughts of developing renunciation, or an emergent mind arise during the cultivation of shamatha, all of those, too, would be forms of scattering.

* * *

Your actions should be according to the time. - A Tibetan saying

Remedies for the two types of distraction

Distraction that is caused by attachment to sense pleasures is termed excitement, and is most effectively remedied by contemplation. Meditating on impermanence, and altruism, on the nature of samsara, on suffering, on the drawbacks of following self interest and the desire- these naturally lessen excitement during calm abiding meditation. Rather than forcing the mind to be a certain way, this approach is more effective.

Distraction brought about by causes other than attachment to sense pleasures is termed scattering, and is most effectively remedied simply by more practice, with clarity of intention, engaging the mind in meditation.

If in the past we have had the habits of restlessness and agitation, or of dispersion, whether we called it multi-tasking or unnecessary proliferation, then that's what we'll bring to our sitting or walking. By applying ourselves, patiently, gently, and compassionately, with composed energy and awareness, we gradually change the way the mind, and feeling and body are in meditation. This is pretty easy to recognize, even in the short term.

What is important to see here is that the way our mind is now is the result of how we have been up to now, and that we can develop in any way we would like, according to our needs and interests.

Cultivating the Continuity of Awareness - The Main Practice

{Note: this is a revised version of a earlier essay, that, for practical purposes, uses the terms mindfulness and awareness in specific ways. I have changed some wording for the sake of clarity and consistency. See the two related essays for more about the need for this distinction.}

Cultivating the continuity of awareness is the primary practice when we are doing samatha meditation

- from the teachings of Geshe Sopa

Receiving a tradition of teachings on a practical subject like samatha meditation is, in a way, to benefit from others' mistakes, as well as their successes. Like it is with the traditions of Chinese, Tibetan, or Indian medicine, each generation is given both the principles to study, as well as the record of how others, including their teachers have made use of these teachings.

If we receive more than one lineage of instruction, where sages have attained a meaningful result, it's natural to want to clarify what they have in common, for our own purposes.

The samatha teachings, as they have come to us, are undeniably from a scholastic tradition, and almost always follow an outline that has these lists of points that are so common in Tibetan Buddhism. These are summaries of the different sections of the teaching. They are usually given as

the six preliminaries, the five faults and the eight antidotes, the nine stages of calm abiding, the six powers and the four modes of attention.

These teachings, it should be remembered, come from an oral tradition, and the reason these lists were put together was that the essential points

were then easy to memorize, and teach to others, who most of the time did not have a text to carry and refer to.

One possible danger for Westerners in particular in receiving the teachings in this form though is that we may get lost in the details, and in an overly intellectual approach that does not reflect where we should put our attention when we *actually practice.* This danger is likely especially when there's intellectual pride involved.

As a matter of emphasis then, this much should be said, for students going forward.

The main practice in samatha meditation is that of cultivating the continuity of a calm and clear awareness, vividly present, relaxed, at ease, and spacious.

Ajahn Pasanno has taught: With the steady, relaxed continuity of awareness, the fruits of meditation begin to manifest…

What is this continuity of awareness?

When there is directed attention, the mind 'sticks to', or 'adheres to' its object. The function of mindfulness then is to keep an object of awareness in mind, and to hold it calmly and steadily.

In the words of the Satipatthana Sutta:

Ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside desire and dissatisfaction in regard to the world…

In the traditions that teach jhana, we set aside the five hindrances:

attachment to sense pleasure, aggression, dullness and distraction, and doubt,

and cultivate five jhanic factors:

vitaka, *vichara*, piti, sukha, and ekaggata -

initial application directing the mind to its object, *sustaining awareness of the object*, joy and ease, and one pointedness.

It's said that the first of these, vitakka, is like 'lifting up the mind to its object', and making contact with it, be it the breath or posture, or the experience of walking, or a theme we are studying. The second, *vichara*, is quite simply continuing this directed attention, and gently and firmly cultivating that flow of sustained awareness.

As I have pointed out, when it comes to the meditation practice itself, settling the mind and clarifying attention, it is primarily awareness that accomplishes our purpose.

Gen Lamrimpa taught:

It is said that there is no other cultivation of concentration apart from the very process of cultivating or maintaining awareness. That is, if you are cultivating mindfulness of the breath, (keeping the breath in mind) that itself is the very means of developing concentration.

and,

You do not have to add anything else to the process.

Everything is contained in that.

It's easy to lost sight of this, especially when we receive a comprehensive outline of all we will need in the course of practice. In our enthusiasm for practice, we may spend more time than is actually useful *thinking about* the teachings, *instead of practicing* them in any meaningful way. We can get

sidetracked from our own direct experience, especially if we have the kind of mind that likes to think about these details. We have to know our own mind. I've done more than enough of this conceptual proliferation myself, and so I speak here as one who has missed the mark plenty before.

Simply aiming to have a continuity of clear and calm awareness is the main practice when cultivating samatha or jhana. This can be very enjoyable. Everything we seek, and everything the teachings then refer to are included in that. This is where I am now with these traditions of practice, I'm glad to say.

Awareness here is simply staying with the object of our meditation, however our mind is, whether it be the breath, or walking, or the theme we are contemplating, and cultivating the continuity of clear attention.

Thich Nhat Hanh teaches,

I define this as the practice of being fully present and alive, body and mind united. Mindfulness is the energy that helps us to know what is going on in the present moment.

and,

Mindfulness is to be aware of what is going on, and what is there.

Not only is this awareness a capacity we all naturally have, it is also something we can develop. This is useful to know.

The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing says,

When the practitioner can maintain, without distraction, the practice of observing the body in the body, the feelings in the feelings, the mind in the mind, and the objects of mind in the objects of mind, persevering, fully awake, clearly understanding his state, gone beyond all attachment and aversion to this life, with

unwavering, steadfast, imperturbable meditative stability, he will attain the First Factor of Awakening, namely mindfulness. When this factor is developed, it will come to perfection.

Geshe Sopa adds:

Awareness (here) is definite and sure. It apprehends its object with certainty.

His quote at the top of this paper says in full, in my own wording of it-

The continuity of clear awareness is the primary practice when we are doing samatha meditation, but introspection is also critical, especially in the beginning.

We know the quality of our meditation here, and all the adjustments and qualities that we are to cultivate, are found *in this very practice itself*, for example, of keeping the breath in mind.

the meditator's task of knowing evolves until it comes to include the presence of discriminative understanding…

- Analayo Bhikkhu - Satipatthana - The Direct Path to Realization

The central importance of awareness and its simple and direct application is often glossed over, curiously enough, when samatha is taught. Most extensive teachings that I know of give more explanation instead to the antidotes to dullness and distraction.

We may want to stay with the extraordinary, rich and detailed descriptions of meditation, but we should know that these only take us so far. We have to actually practice them, and when we do, our time, energy and attention is most meaningfully directed to simply engaging with and cultivating this one quality, and making it central: *of awake, calm and clear attention comfortably staying with its object.*

Regarding Right Effort in meditation, Analayo Bhikkhu wrote

Since both deficiency of effort and excessive tension can obstruct one's progress, the quality of diligence is best understood as a balanced but sustained application of energy.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his Simple Guidelines to Meditation says

In sustaining awareness of the object, you should try to maintain two complementary qualities: firmness and softness. Your attention should be firm in so far as it remains continuously on the object, without wandering or drifting off into drowsiness and daydreaming. It should be soft in that you do not forcefully "press" your attention against the object, but just let it rest there as if it were "sitting" on the spot where you experience the breath (or steps) most clearly and distinctly…

The first fault described in the samatha meditation instructions is laziness, which is removed by hearing the benefits of this practice, gaining faith and generating enthusiasm to meditate, doing so with zeal, and removing that obstacle with the pliancy that results.

The second fault is called forgetfulness, which is said to mean either losing the object of awareness, or forgetting the instructions. The antidote to this in either case is mindfulness.

This primary, traditional meaning of mindfulness, as mindfulness-and-clear comprehension, recalls what we are doing and why we are doing it, our purpose, and the whole context of our lives and practice of these teachings. Then, when actually meditating, we are bringing our mind to an object, staying with our experience with clear awareness. If we stay with it, everything is contained in that.

As the mind becomes more clear through the practice itself, we overcome the fault of dullness, and as we gradually gather our attention, the other

main obstacle, of distraction, is also overcome. This is sometimes called collectedness.

We need a certain amount of humility, and a willingness here to sit and walk through a certain amount of dullness and distraction as the mind settles and clears, especially in the beginning, or when returning to practice, and *to persist through these, and be process oriented.* This isn't easy to do sometimes, particularly if we are holding some ideal in mind, or have had good experiences before, of clarity and calm. It doesn't help much either if we're invested with our ego in cultivation. This can make us want to give up to soon, before we settle. We need a gentle patience here, a certain amount of faith in our practice, and of course, time and application.

We then see with greater clarity just how this mind is when attending comfortably to our steps, and to our sitting and breathing, and adjust naturally from there.

We may like to experiment with each of the different faults and antidotes, giving each a turn as what we emphasize in practice. Sometimes it's very useful to cultivate the causes that dispel laziness; at other times, attention to simply being aware can be central; at other times, recognizing the presence of dullness or distraction with the power of introspection, and adjusting for these; at other times letting be when we have enough causes brought together to make progress in practice.

It's something of this last fault, of over-application, that has led me to think once again, with more clarity now about *the rightful place of continuity of awareness* in terms of time and the application of energy in actually cultivating samatha meditation. Too much thinking about the teachings can too easily displace engagement with sitting or walking, and so I would like to suggest that we each see for ourselves the emphasis that personally brings all the results that we seek.

A Necessary Balance

I've had the good fortune this year of finding the teachings of Ringu Tulku. He has a number of fine books, and his students have assembled and made available a wonderful collection of his recorded talks.

One of the sets of talks is on the Stages of Calm Abiding Meditation, and this was interesting to me for a couple of reasons. First, these teachings are usually presented from the Gelugpa lineage, and so I enjoyed hearing his presentation from a Kagyud approach to meditation.

The other reason I have enjoyed these talks, and benefit from them is that their emphasis matches a need that I have, personally, when engaging the Calm Abiding teachings. I do tend to over-think a subject sometimes, and so I find Ringu Tulku's approach very helpful. As long as I'm subject to what they call conceptual proliferation, then this is a necessary balance for me, to hold these teachings lightly.

His emphasis is on *spaciousness, lightness, simplicity, and relaxation*.

It's interesting to note how, when we learn a lineage's approach to a basic practice of meditation, right from the outset we are orienting ourselves in a way that naturally leads to their deeper teachings. For example, following the Gelugpa presentation of these teachings, a person develops an incisive intelligence that leads to liberating insight meditation. In the case of the Kagyud lineages, the wisdom teachings are called Mahamudra, the non-conceptual, direct knowing of the Nature of Mind.

In one of their prayers, there is the aspiration that

May meditation be free from intellectualization…

and Longchenpa said,

In the unborn nature of mind,
the pure state, like the sky,
events within the mind are not solidified,
but left to fade and vanish,
like a heap of clouds.

Meditate on what is, and eternally has been so-
the undistracted awareness of simplicity…

To know when one is really on the right track, the mind should be extremely relaxed, extremely spacious but absolutely poised, absolutely awake and vivid, the awareness should be very clear as if for the first time you have woken up.

- Ani Tenzin Palmo

Ringu Tulku starts by talking about the qualities of mind that we use in meditation, as awareness, and mindfulness.

With mindfulness, Lama Yeshe said, you know what you are doing, and why you are doing it.

You are aware of what is happening, and you know what to do, says Ringu Tulku.

He also mentions what is sometimes translated as *conscientiousness*.

The then goes on to say that:

Sometimes I think there are too many methods in Tibetan Buddhism.

You need to have one solid practice, and then just do that.

The Stages of Meditation are about what you practice.

and that, when it comes to a practice of meditation,

The simpler the better.

He continues, saying:

We are always, running, running away from something, or towards something. The only way not to run is to relax, but with awareness, and to practice lightly…

Meditation in this way can be very restful. We are resting the mind peacefully.

and,

There is a need for mindfulness, but also a spacious mindfulness.

I recall that in The Essentials of Mahamudra Meditation, Lama Kong Ka says,

concentration-effort has a tendency to hinder that spontaneity and freedom of spirit, without which it is difficult to unfold the vast and liberating Mind.

Ringu Tulku continues by saying:

When your mind becomes too concentrated, too focussed, (the mind too withdrawn) then you can either become dull, and go to sleep, or you can become tense.

If you can make your mind more relaxed and spacious, practicing lightly, then it's more comfortable, like a holiday.

If our minds are spacious, he says, then thoughts can be happening, and we're not disturbed by them…

This kind of meditation can be very subtle. It's not about *trying* so much as understanding how to settle the mind.

He says,

Calm and clarity have to be together… here, we are not creating additional concepts…

Sometimes too much thinking and analysis is not very useful

and he recommends becoming friendly with meditation, and enjoying being in our natural state.

This leads naturally to the progressively deeper stages of meditation, as it is presented in the Mahamudra teachings.

In his conclusion on the subject, his view is that

It's good to understand the stages of meditation, but it's not good to think about them too much… Am I on the first stage? or the second? or in between?

Don't try to be too perfect…

We should just practice, without judging it too much.

I especially enjoyed hearing him then talk about the yanas, or 'vehicles' of practice, and saying that 'each person their own yana', and saying, 'There are as many yanas as there are people'. This has been my feeling as well. It's up to each of us to see what is most helpful to us in our practice, and in our lives.

On the Power of Introspection

Traditional Buddhist teachings on calm abiding meditation recognize a number of faults and their antidotes. One of the errors we can make is *not recognizing the presence of laxity or excitement,* also called dullness or distraction. The remedy to this particular fault is *the power of introspection*, that notices when these are there.

Lama Lodro calls this strength 'introspective alertness'. Other teachings call it simply 'alertness', or 'vigilance'. We're on guard for these 'two thieves', as it's said.

Most teachers advise waiting awhile and cultivating some experience in meditation before developing this particular skill. Geshe Sopa, on the other hand in his book on samatha, recommends bringing it to mind early on, before the first burst of energy that led us to meditate fades.

In the calm abiding teachings, with introspection, we know what we are doing, and why we are doing it. We are engaged with our object of meditation, be it the breath, or walking, or a theme we are contemplating, and, at the same time, we are aware of the manner of our being with that experience. I've heard it said this one factor acts as a quality control.

This sounds so simple, and is usually talked about so briefly in the teachings that the great value of the power of introspection may be easily overlooked.

I remember while on retreat a few years ago, a few monks visited the hermitage where I was staying, and I had a chance to talk with one of them, and ask him about his practice. I was interested to know how his meditation was different from a lay person, living in a city in particular. From what I could tell, being on retreat, or living as a monastic, we remove ourselves from a lot of the common distractions, and so what we're left

with is - our mind, without either the gross or middling levels of the afflictions manifest.

What I was getting at, with some amazement, was this practice of looking within, and working with our subtle tendencies. This is something even Buddhists don't usually talk about. We have to listen carefully.

In the calm abiding teachings, for example, they say that introspection should be able to detect right away when laxity, our awareness becoming less vivid and clear, or excitement, are present, and that we should learn to notice these *even before they arise.*

I remember being fascinated the first time I heard this idea - that we can become aware of something before it is manifest.

To my thinking now, the traditional teaching did its job because I am here all these years later, still thinking about it, and looking into it. Actually, what's become clear to me, to be more precise, is that, if something is not manifest then there is nothing to notice. What these teachings are pointing to then, to be accurate, is *a more subtle form* of what could develop into laxity or excitement, dullness, or distraction.

Without cultivating introspection, it's taught that we may fall into the mistake of believing our meditation is quite good, and develop bad habits that can be hard to change, just because they are not recognized. It's taught that we could stay in a state of subtle dullness, and not one that is truly vivid, clear and bright, and that facilitates wisdom, for a long time. That's the danger for people who do a lot of meditation.

The non recognition of distraction or dullness then is a serious fault, and although it is easily spoken and read about in a few words, it shouldn't be glossed over for that reason. There's something deep to be discovered when we turn to cultivating the power of introspection. It has many great

advantages, both within samatha meditation practice, and within all liberating Buddhist practice.

The word ‘introspection’ generally means looking within. In this case, it is looking for something specific, aware of and ready to immediately respond and adjust to the arising of those particular faults. That general sense of the word though opens up the meaning further, and presents more uses in self cultivation, that in turn support meditation.

For example, through this power of introspection, we can be aware of the subtle presence of impatience, or anger, and if we are aiming to have more patience, or loving kindness and gentleness, we can see our opportunity right there. This would be missed if not for this particular strength of awareness, that we can cultivate;

What they call *circumspection,* in the Theravada teachings uses this same power. We’re on the lookout for any subtle arising of a difficult emotion, such as fear, or craving, or anger, or pride, so that we can first pacify and then remove these, through insight, which gets at the root of the problems.

We can use this very capacity to develop a more subtle ethical awareness, in line with our highest ideals, such that if something bothers our conscience, or our innate sense of right and wrong in the slightest, we are aware of it, and we can adjust our thinking, speaking, and actions so they are in line with our values.

Introspective alertness, or introspective discernment also has great advantages in noticing positive qualities and our own unique store of positive connections, and good karma.

This brings us right up to what we would call intuition, that may be without words or images, but is a kind of direct knowing, one that is felt, and that is immediate.

When we read a teaching, or think of one who has guided us with such care, the positive feeling may be subtle at first. Recognizing it, we can bring it to the fore in our awareness, and let that positive experience grow. This adds to the joy.

In terms of the ultimate remedy to suffering, noticing the presence of ego grasping and it's lessening is of great value, and this is done with the same capacity of mind. We can see clearly for ourselves that as the mistaken consciousness lessens, then all the afflictive emotions based on that lessen as well. Due to our having insight, this 'fading away' is surely encouraging, as it is the path to liberation.

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 that 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 that 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 Travelogue Through the Nine Stages of Calm Abiding Meditation

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 that 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 meditaiton 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.

In Summary - from Geshe Sopa

First you must understand and follow the instructions you have received regarding how to set your mind on the object. Repeatedly reflect on how to fix your attention, and then apply the methods to bring about some continuity of attention.

Then, if your mindfulness declines and you become distracted, quickly recall your meditation object.

Next, generate powerful mindfulness that prevents distraction before it occurs.

After that, see the faults of laxity and excitement and develop intense introspection.

Then, even if subtle faults arise you immediately recognize them and stop them.

Upon eliminating the faults, use the power of perseverance to lengthen your meditation.

After mastering the ability to meditate uninterrupted by the hindrances with perseverance, your concentration will become effortless.

{From Steps on the Path to Enlightenment, Volume 4: Samatha, page 133}

A Few Reflections on the Practice of Calm Abiding Meditation

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:

1. that the more we develop the qualities of calm abiding, the clarity, peace, and calm continuity of attention, the better;

that there is a great need, and many profoundly meaningful advantages for us all to doing this:

2. we will be able to free our own mind from confusion and affliction;

we will also be able to more effectively develop any quality or realization we would like;

and,

3. 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.

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 ourself, 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.'

The Old Fashioned Radio Analogy

I have heard Alan Wallace describe the degrees of concentration we can have, and the way that restlessness and distraction can be described as follows:

He used the analogy of an old fashioned radio that had a dial one would use to tune into a program. Good concentration, he said, was like getting a strong and clear signal, with no static or interference at all.

Less than optimal reception in those radios would result in some amount of static, and this can be compared to having an object in mind, and yet some movement of the mind's energy that isn't totally focussed on what one is doing or contemplating;

This interference we can hear to the radio signal, he went on to say, might even begin to come in as another station altogether. It's was even possible sometimes that we could hear two signals at once.

Something like this, he pointed out, can go on in our mind as well. As we are attentive to one thing, and then gradually we can have another thought or image or train of thought begin to be perceptible. We can have the experience of these other thoughts at first being like static, on the periphery, and then what they are becoming more clear.

On a radio, this is called 'station drift' and Alan used this analogy to describe how the mind can move away from its object in meditation, and how we can adjust for this.

If a radio is left unattended, or not responded to with an intention to purely keep the original signal, this drift can result in the reception switching over and picking up another station altogether from where we started. This is

comparable to distraction happening without mindfulness and self regulation.

With a radio, when we first begin to get static or receive another station, we can respond by adjusting the dial ever so slightly, to keep a pure and true signal coming through.

With the mind in meditation, as soon as we notice dullness or distraction begin, we can spontaneously adjust the mind by bringing up the strong and clear intention to focus single pointedly on our object or theme.

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 gradually 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 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 itself 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 neutral, 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.

With ones mind thus concentrated, purified, and bright, unblemished, free from defects, pliant, malleable, steady, and attained to imperturbability, one directs and inclines it to knowledge and vision" of things as they are.

The tools we use - for developing the qualities of calm abiding meditation

The Six Powers and the Four Kinds of Attention

Lama Lodro pointed out that, just as we need different tools to build something like an airplane, we also need different tools, techniques, or ways of using our mind to develop calm and clarity in meditation.

We naturally want to make use of *the right tool* or method for the task at hand. And so the answer to 'where should I put my effort in meditation?' always depends on how our mind is at the time.

With this in mind, it's useful to have outlines such as these, the gift and legacy of teachers and meditators of the past, and present time.

I didn't think I'd want to use another list, but in this case, I can see how it can actually be very useful, as it's said, like a description of the tools one can and should use to progress in practice.

What are called the Six Powers and the Four Kinds of Attention line up very nicely with the Nine Stages teachings, and in fact are usually given after those instructions, and so I include a working version of them here.

As far as what are referred to as the nine stages is clear, this will make sense and be of value.

The first power is *the power of hearing the teachings*. This gets us going, to stage one, which is placing the mind on the object.

The second power is *the power of reflection*, which gives us the motivation to keep applying effort, so that we go from stage one, to stage two – that of re-placement.

Third is *the power of mindfulness*, and this is what we use primarily in stages three – patch like placement, through stages four – continual placement, and five, (which I call) brightening the mind.

The fourth is *the power of introspective alertness*, and this comes into operation in order to cultivate the qualities found in stages six – pacification, and seven – complete pacification.

Sometimes introspective alertness is listed as entering into use in stage five, where one increases the clarity of attention- and it can work to think of it that way too.

As I understand it, mindfulness is still the main factor, and now, as a result of the qualities that have developed in the preceding stages, a sharp awareness and keen sensitivity emerges as well that is able to access and adjust the quality of one's experience.

I can see the inner logic here, of presenting the teachings in this way. As in other places earlier, if we try to use, for example this factor of mind, of introspective alertness sooner, we may have some result, but it's place, where it is most apparent and useful is in cultivating qualities of the sixth and seventh stages (or fifth, sixth and seventh).

Lama Lodro said, when first mentioning this quality, You don't need to worry about this yet… but later on is when it comes into use…

The fifth power is that of *diligence*, or *perseverance*, and this is what takes a person to, and through the eighth stage, of one pointedness.

And the sixth power is that of complete familiarity, which is what is used on the ninth stage, that of equipoise.

The Four Kinds of Attention are:

attention with effort
interrupted effort
uninterrupted effort, and,
effortless, or spontaneous effort

These line up as follows:

The *attention with effort* is described as being like lightly squeezing the object of the mind, or using some force to take hold of it.

This is what we use when beginning meditation, in stage one, to overcome inertia, to get rolling.

I can see here how these teachings, on the four kinds of attention, can apply within sessions. For example, if we move completely off the object for a while, and are not meditating, we need some kind of effort to get going again.

A type of forceful effort is what is used to overcome the habits of the lazy, or distracted mind.

The second kind of attention spoken of is called interrupted effort, and this is what we use in stages two and three – re-placement, and patch-like placement.

We've gotten going, gotten some momentum, and now, with the continued application of mindfulness, we able to stay with our object with some clarity, and gradually with greater ease, for longer and longer periods.

The third kind of attention is *uninterrupted attention*, and this is its quality from stages four, continued placement, through five – brightening the mind, six, pacification, seven, complete pacification and eight, one pointedness.

Finally, the fourth kind of attention is referred to as spontaneous, or effortless attention, and it's taught that this is what is used on the ninth stage, that of equipoise.

As is always the case with teachings on meditation, it helps to keep in mind the big picture, so as not to get lost in the details. We should use teachings such as these as far as they are helpful to us. I think this would please the Buddhas, and our teachers very much.

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.

The Essential Point

Meditate without distraction or dullness.

Calm Abiding in Three Points

To assure that whatever meditation we do
is as productive as it can be,
we should aim for three qualities to be present.
These are:
Clarity,
Stability, and
Vividness

Clarity here means the true wakefulness of the mind.
It is the opposite of sleepiness or dullness.
Instead, our senses are open, and our experience totally fresh.

Stability here means staying with one object or experience in a relaxed way, exclusively, without distraction.
This is developed gradually,
and is supported by ethics, and by doing one thing at a time in our daily life.

The quality of vividness acts to counter
a certain laxity of the mind.
The mind can be peaceful, still and clear,
but in order for us not to just 'coast',
we need real sharpness, and precision.

It is stability, clarity and vividness together
that lead to deeper understanding and experience.
With these qualities, practice become more powerful,
and meditation can have a much greater result.

Colophon: Because many people study and meditate without these factors, the outcome is far less than it could be. Seeing what a loss this is, and wanting to encourage people to get the most out of whatever meditation they do, I've written this short description of the qualities of calm abiding.

May all beings benefit.

Jason Espada, San Francisco, June 8th, 2010

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.

Part IV. Supplementary Essays

Loving Kindness Practice

Introduction

There is a light in the mind when we love selflessly, no doubt about it. Love is what lets us see beauty. Delighting in others is a kind of enlightenment, we could say, and that light is sustenance; it brings happiness and well being to the heart and mind.

If you are interested in this as a formal Buddhist practice, see *Living in Beauty - Buddhist Loving Kindness Practice.* I'm also very glad to be able to recommend the website called dharmaseed, which is a great treasure trove of audio talks on many aspects of Dharma practice.

What a time to be alive!

On the next pages you will find two versions of the Metta Sutta, the teaching on Loving Kindness taught by the Buddha, followed by two traditional methods for cultivating Metta, the second with some personal variations added, of course. They are essentially the same meditation.

The first method offered here I received in 1998, at a monastery in Thailand called Wat Asokaram, from a Western monk there named Phra Ingo. It uses a simple visualization.

The second method uses phrases to generate loving kindness, to guide the mind and keep it on track. These can be combined, of course, whatever works best.

Sometimes I feel like, 'enough with words!' At these times, just bringing an image to mind is enough to enjoy this meditation.

When we practice metta, we're dong something very simple. We're getting in touch with and awakening the heart's innate capacity for love. So there's no need to make it complicated, or to have any doubt that this is something we can all do.

Then, when it comes to using metta phrases for the cultivation of loving kindness, some teachers say that the fewer phrases the better, but this is something we can experiment with for ourselves, and see what works best for us.

Whatever method we use, I think Ajaan Pasanno explained the aim of metta practice very well when he said: 'In reality, the cultivation of loving kindness is not the actual repeating of the words – I mean, you use those words and phrases, but it's about the feeling, that feeling of loving kindness, the feeling of warmth, the feeling of acceptance, the feeling of openness, the feeling of the heart, including and concerned for the happiness of oneself or others, and that's about generating the feeling.

'In terms of meditation, it's that – directing attention to the feeling, or emotion, that sense of kindness, *well-wishing*, and then finding ways to support that, and to shore that up, and allow that to become stable, and then to start to suffuse one's own being, and then allowing that to spread out… and that requires mindfulness, and attention…"[1]

However we approach it, this is such a worthwhile practice. Don't you agree?

The Buddha taught that, 'Having seen that all beings, like ourselves, have a desire for happiness, one methodically develops loving kindness for all beings.'

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[1] From the recording of the 2008 Metta Retreat, available from Abhayagiri Monastery

This Buddhist loving kindness practice naturally leads us to what are called The Four Brahma Viharas, or Divine Abidings, of Universal Love, Compassion, Delight in the good, and Peace and balance of mind born of the strength of dedication, also called Equanimity, so I've also included a few verses that express this.

Enjoy! May all beings benefit!

The Metta Sutta

This is what should be done
By those who are skilled in goodness,
And who know the path of peace:

Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech,
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied,
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways,
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,
Not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.

Wishing: in gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.

Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born—
May all beings be at ease!

Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;
Radiating kindness over the entire world,
Spreading upward to the skies,

And downward to the depths;
Outward and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down,
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.

By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense desires,
Is not born again into this world.

The Discourse On Love {Thich Nhat Hanh translation}

He or she who wants to attain peace should practice being upright, humble, and capable of using loving speech. He or she will know how to live simply and happily, with senses calmed, without being covetous and carried away by the emotions of the majority. Let him or her not do anything that will be disapproved of by the wise ones.

(And this is what he or she contemplates:)

May everyone be happy and safe, and may their hearts be filled with joy. May all living beings live in security and in Peace - beings who are frail or strong, tall or short, big or small, visible or not visible, near or far away, already born or yet to be born. May all of them dwell in perfect tranquility. Let no one do harm to anyone. Let no one put the life of anyone in danger. Let no one, out of anger or ill will, wish anyone any harm.

Just as a mother loves and protects her only child at the risk of her own life, we should cultivate Boundless Love to offer to all living beings in the entire cosmos. We should let our boundless love pervade the whole universe, above, below and across. Our love will know no obstacles, our heart will be absolutely free from hatred and enmity. Whether standing or walking, sitting or lying, as long as we are awake, we should maintain this mindfulness of love in our own heart. This is the noblest way of living.

Free from wrong views, greed and sensual desires, living in beauty and realizing perfect understanding, those who practice Boundless Love will certainly transcend Birth and Death.

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 in 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.

Metta - loving kindness practice

Traditionally, metta practice is first done toward oneself, and uses short phrases, such as, *May I be well, happy, and peaceful… May I live with ease…* Then one cultivates metta for one's parents, family, friends and benefactors, including teachers, to neutral ones, or those we don't know, seen and unseen by us, to those we've had some difficulty with, and then to all beings. The general principle is that we start with what is easy, and go from there, and that we go patiently, and gradually.

In general, fewer words are better, but we should have a clear idea of what the words we use mean to us. For different people or groups, different lines may seem more appropriate to reflect on. You're welcome to select from these, to use lines from other sources, or to write your own metta phrases. Sometimes one or two lines are enough. Here is a model. Use your intelligence and skill to adapt meditation, as you see fit. The feeling is the important thing, and the clear intention.

Phrases for metta loving kindness practice

Here are two versions of the traditional phrases that are used:

May they be happy
May they be healthy
May they be peaceful
May they live with ease

...

May they be safe
May they be healthy
May they be happy
May they know they are loved

….

Ani Tenzin Palmo offers this way of expressing metta that has a very nice rhythm to it:

May they be well and happy,
peaceful, and at their ease.

The following was offered by Ajaan Pasanno. Beginning with oneself, it can be adapted to the different categories of people.

May I (they) be well, happy, peaceful, and prosperous.

May no harm come to me (them, etc…)
May no difficulties come to me.
May no problems come to me.

May I always meet with spiritual success.

May I also have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.
May I have the qualities that will allow me to see those through.

…

And here are my own phrases:

May they be entirely well and at their ease.
May they have every happiness.
May they always be safe and protected
May they always know themselves to be greatly loved and cared for

May their heart be open to all the beauty and wonder of life.
May they have all they need and wish for

May they have every blessing
May they have all of the good things that this life has to offer,
every success and all joys.

May they have happiness
May they be healthy
May they have peace,
happiness and harmony in all their relationships

May they know freedom,
the highest happiness, and fulfillment.

As I mentioned earlier, you can also write your own metta phrases – and I encourage you to do so. Make the practice your own. These are just offered as an example. You are welcomed to use whatever works best for you.

Two more traditional methods

There are many ways to develop loving kindness. Two more ways that have come down to us are the spatial extension of metta, and developing metta for different categories of people. In each case, we are aiming to gradually become more inclusive in our love.

In the spatial extension of metta, we begin with where we are physically, and extend goodwill in front of us, to the left and right, in all directions, step by step, further and further, as much as we like and feel comfortable doing. We can begin where we are sitting and extend the light of metta to those in our own room, household, building, block, neighborhood, city, state, country, continent, hemisphere, world, universe, and beyond....

Another, simple application of the spatial extension of metta can be when we look from our window, we can extend well-wishing to the people we see pass by in the street. When we go out, we can offer metta to those on public transportation, or in line at the grocery store, or to a room of people, such as at work, at the bank, at the doctor's, or at a bar, genuinely wishing them all well.

In developing metta for different categories of people, we have a model in the suttas, and we are encouraged to be creative with it as well. We can develop kindness and well wishing for the young and old, for the rich and poor, for those near and far away; for the happy and the troubled in spirit; for those living in ease, comfort and safety, and those in difficult circumstances, and so on. We can develop this quality of care and support for people of different political views, and for those of different races, for different species and stages of development, and those who live in other worlds. Truly, there is no limit to its application.

The Four Brahma Viharas

Metta practice is done step by step, through the different categories, understanding their purpose, and then all together, as taught, until one reaches the Four 'Brahma Viharas' – the 'Divine Abodes', also called the Four Limitless States. These are Universal Love, Compassion, Joy, and Equanimity, which in this context is the strength and balance of mind that comes from love.

The Four Brahma Viharas can be expressed, and reflected on in a number of ways, including this four line prayer, adapted from the Tibetan Tradition:

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness…

May all beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering…

I rejoice in all that is beautiful and right in the world,
in all virtue and positive action,
and in all happiness and good fortune...

and abide in stable, impartial love...

{My own versions of the traditional teachings, "The Cultivation of Loving Kindness', and 'The Suffusion with the Divine Abidings' follow.}

The Cultivation of Loving Kindness

Having seen that like oneself
all beings seek for happiness,
one patiently then cultivates love for all beings

May all the precious children of this world
be entirely well and at their ease…

May I be happy, healthy, and peaceful
May I be free from suffering

May my family, friends,
neutral ones, and all honored guests
have every happiness
May they be free from all suffering
May they be free from all danger, and all difficulty

Within the boundaries of this town,
may all beings have happiness
Likewise those in other places,
in other cities, and countries,
in all places,
may they all have happiness, health and peace

All creatures and all breathing things,
all persons and all entities…
men, women and children,
the Noble Ones, the unawake,
Devas, and unhappy ones
who in the ten directions dwell -

May all beings be happy and at peace,
and may their hearts be filled with joy!

Suffusion with the Divine Abidings - An Extended Version

{I. Loving Kindness}

I will abide
pervading the world
with loving-kindness,
all around and everywhere,
and to all as to myself

I will abide
pervading this all encompassing world
with loving-kindness,
abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

with unconditional love,
warmth, and gentleness,
gratitude,
appreciation and respect,
supreme well-wishing,
and encouragement for all!

May all beings be happy,
May they all be healthy,
May they all dwell in safety, comfort and peace,
May they all know they are loved

I will abide
pervading the world
with loving-kindness -

May all beings be entirely well
and at their ease! -

From the insects on the ground, and under the ground,
to the birds in the trees, and in the sky,
the fish in the waters,
animals,
and people everywhere,

young and old,
rich and poor,
male and female,
realized and ordinary people,
near and far away,
already born and yet to be born –

May they all be entirely well and at their ease!

May they all be safe
May they all be healthy

May they all be happy, and fulfilled
May they all know they are loved and cared for

May they have all they need and wish for in their lives
May they all have an abundance of good things!

All around and everywhere,
and to all as to myself –

May all have supreme happiness,
health, and peace!

I will abide
pervading this all encompassing world
with loving-kindness,

abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

with unconditional good-will,
warmth, and gentleness,
gratitude,
appreciation and respect,
supreme well-wishing,
and encouragement for all!

{II. Compassion}

I will abide
pervading the world
with compassion,
all around and everywhere,
and to all as to myself

I will abide
pervading this all encompassing world
with compassion,
abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

with a heart of complete solidarity with all those who suffer in any way,
with engagement with them
and with support and tender care

young and old,
rich and poor,
male and female,
realized and ordinary people,
near and far away,
already born and yet to be born –

May they all be free from all their suffering,
and the causes of suffering
May they all be healed
May they all be completely safe and protected

I will abide with compassion,
courage, joy,
and real strength…

{III. Joy}

I will abide
pervading the world
with a heart that rejoices in the good,
everywhere it is found,
in the arts,
in children,
in the natural world,
in myself and in others,
in teachers, and in healers,
in kind and caring people,
in cherished elders, ancestors,
family and friends

I will abide
pervading this all encompassing world
with joy and celebration
abundant, exalted, immeasurable

{IV. The Immutable Strength of Love, also known as its Equanimity}

I will abide
pervading the world
with the immutable strength of love
stable, and dedicated
all around and everywhere,
and to all as to myself

With all people
and in every circumstance,
steadfast, loyal,
courageous, and reliable,
with the power of love's own committed equanimity,
patience, peace and strength

I will abide
pervading the all encompassing world
with this stable, impartial love,
abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

at all times with a heart,
that is steady, and joyful,
even, and serene

Mindful Breathing as a Loving Kindness Practice

Breath meditation and loving kindness practice are usually taught separately, however it can be greatly healing to combine these two practices. In the Buddha's teachings, when we practice breath meditation, after finding the in and out breath, the next step is to become aware of our whole body, while breathing in and out, and to calm this body of ours. Often in commentaries this is gone through briefly, on the way to other meditations.

When *Metta* or loving kindness practice is taught by itself, we can get a good sense of what pure kindness feels like. There is an acceptance, gentleness and encouragement that we can know from the inside. To begin with, we're told to bring to mind whoever is easiest to generate feelings of warmth and love for. When we think of children, for example, the feeling is uncomplicated and unconditional love, clear and bright. We would do anything for them, naturally. We wish them every conceivable happiness. We then take this same feeling and do our best to direct it towards other people, including ourselves.

In his book The Path of Emancipation, Thich Nhat Hanh explains how we can join breath meditation with an awareness of the body with having love and compassion for ourselves, and why this is necessary. Here are a few notes. He says that, *Sometimes we believe our body is a stranger to us, we are alienated from our own body, and that is why we have to go home to our body and reconcile ourselves with it.*

For many reasons, it can be painful to inhabit the body. The physical carries the memory of the wounds we have suffered, as well as those of our ancestors. Often we have judged ourselves and found ourselves wanting. Thay says that when we practice breathing in and out with an awareness of our body *we go home to our body and embrace it. We reconcile*

ourselves with our body. It is very important to go back to our body and show our concern, attention, and love. Our body might be suffering. It might have been abandoned for a long time. That is why we generate the energy of mindfulness and go back to embrace our body. This is the beginning of the practice of love.

In the past, we've may have taken to food, drugs, sex, and endless distractions to avoid feeling. Even meditation can be an escape into some ideal of what it means to be 'a meditator'. We were divided. Now we can try something different. We can begin to awaken more kindness and compassion for ourselves. He continues: *We embrace our body tenderly during our in-breath and out-breath, with the intention to reconcile ourselves with it, to take care of it, and to show our concern and loving kindness.You may want to modify the language a little, but the content of the practice is the same: "Breathing in, I am aware of my body. Breathing out, I smile to my body." This is a smile of awareness, a smile that shows your concern and loving kindness.*

Smiling, directing the sunlight of warmth, acceptance and care to the our body is healing, and unifying. It can slowly reestablish our connection with our physical self. An inner smile communicates love. With it, we uphold what is good in us. It is also a way to be with what is difficult, without turning away. Just as a mother would embrace her child, we can tenderly hold whatever we feel is broken, or flawed, or is in any way lacking in ourselves. We can gently embrace ourselves, breath by breath, and step by step. Thay continues *When you go back to your body, first you may want to embrace your body as a whole, in its entirety. Afterwards, you can pay attention to the different parts of your body. Each part should be embraced by our mindfulness, and we should smile to it. This is the practice of compassion, of love, directed to your body.*

We can practice like this, with or without the words: Breathing in, I am aware of my right shoulder, breathing out, I smile to my right shoulder; Breathing in, I am aware of my left shoulder, breathing out, I smile to my shoulder… We go through our whole body this way, from top to bottom, front and back, right and left, our face, throat, chest, arms, abdomen, groin,

legs… Where there is some discomfort or tension, we can stay in that place longer, breathing in and out, and directing our attention and care to that part of ourselves. When we practice in this way, some parts of ourselves, such as our heart, may respond immediately, with a feeling of great relief and gratitude. It's been waiting such a long time to be comforted! Clearly, the experience of this body of ours contains our feelings and our mind. They 'inter-are'.

Where there is suffering, either in ourselves or in our world, it is because there has been a lack of attention, love, and understanding. Now, each breath, each look, each thought we direct towards ourselves can be brimming with love, Each step, and every attentive moment can be like a gentle caress. It can be like nectar, true medicine, and a firm embrace. After a time, having loving kindness towards ourselves allows us to settle peacefully, with a calm and clear mind that is then a basis for further insight. Compared to simple awareness of the breath and movement, this is bringing more of our beautiful inner qualities to bear on our practice. We can use all of our inner resources. When we learn to be with that is difficult, with an open heart, gradually it can help to awaken our humanity. We can learn to calm our discomfort, our fears, and insecurities, and see deeply into them. As people who practice meditation for any length of time can tell you, this can have far reaching effects.

No matter what our temperament, I think that each one of us needs to have kindness for ourselves. We need patience, gentleness, and warmth to heal, to become whole, and to travel a path of greater self understanding and inner freedom. This is so important for all of our sake, so experiment and see what methods work best for you. If you like, you can try practicing metta and breath meditation separately, and then combining them and see what effect it has. We are all called to a great work. However we approach it, understanding ourselves and others and this world, and having something to offer starts here, with taking care of ourselves well. It begins with us.

Drawing on the Qualities of Metta to Clear Away the Hindrances to Meditation - From 'Metta as a Concentration Practice'

I've found that we can adjust the mind in meditation by using the qualities that arise from metta practice. Once metta gets flowing, we can see how it naturally counters each of what are traditionally call the five hindrances: sensual desire, aversion or ill will, dullness, distraction and doubt.

1. Being a pleasing method, and bringing feelings of well being, can naturally subdue the attractions we might have for other objects, at least for a time.

2. Anger and aversion for ourselves or for others are also directly countered by metta loving kindness, as we become more able to patiently sit with our own faults, and also get to know our own good, and loveable qualities, and those of others.

3 & 4. Love also has the capacity to either soothe the body and mind, or to energize and brighten it, depending on what we need.

I think of a mother holding her baby, who is crying, or upset in some way. The mother holds her child with such care and tenderness, and slowly the child settles down. When we can attend to ourselves and our restless and distracted energy in this same way, gently, patiently, with great loving care, we can feel ourselves gradually become quiet, settled, and collected.

Loving kindness practice can also wake up the body, mind and heart. When I received a short practice of metta from a Western monk in Thailand, he suggested that I could use an image, such as that of a beautiful sun overhead. We can imagine this light of loving kindness filling our entire mind, heart, and body.

Certainly, having love in mind brings enthusiasm, and strength, and we can then apply these fresh, awakened qualities to our meditation practice itself.

5. This leaves only doubt among the hindrances to say something about. The doubting mind is tricky, because it can stop practice altogether, when what we really need at such times is more skill, or to just continue even when it isn't easy, or enjoyable.

Of the basic principles in metta, the one I find most useful when it comes to keeping on going is that we can only take the step that is right in front of us, wherever we are right now. Being kind to ourselves in this way always feels like a gesture of pure metta.

Doubt is cleared up when we have confidence in our abilities, or in the path we are on. This happens through practice, and not through intellectualizing, which is where doubting can be a trap. There's a place for scrutiny, and analysis, of course, but when it comes to the kind of doubt that isn't open minded inquiry, but instead tells us ahead of time that something has no value, or isn't effective, it's better to resolve that through practice. When meeting challenges in meditation practice, it helps to be process oriented, and with the warm energy of metta loving kindness, to encourage ourselves. Then, like a stream that becomes more clear by flowing on, by continuing to work at a method, our practice can show its true beauty and worth.

* * *

Sometimes the aim of samadhi in general is referred to as pliancy, or, a malleable mind – meaning we can use it whatever way we like, without resistance.

One morning I had an interesting experience of this vis-à-vis metta. I thought of this kind, accommodating quality of mind, at its best, as being supremely malleable. Loving kindness is capable of adjusting itself to whatever circumstances we are in, and holding whatever comes up. This is something I try to remember.

On the relationship between concentration and discernment

A selection from Straight From the Heart, by Ajahn Maha Boowa

When we're resting so as to give rise to stillness, the stillness is the strength of mind that can reinforce discernment and make it agile. We have to rest so as to have stillness. If there is no stillness, if there's nothing but discernment running, it's like a knife that hasn't been sharpened. We keep chopping away - chock, chock, chock - but it's hard to tell whether we're using the edge of the blade or the back. We simply have the desire to know, to see, to understand, to uproot defilement, whereas discernment hasn't been sharpened by resting in stillness - the reinforcement that gives peace and strength in the heart - and so it's like a knife that hasn't been sharpened. Whatever gets chopped doesn't cut through easily. It's a simple waste of energy.

So for the sake of what's fitting while resting the mind in its 'home of concentration,' we have to let it rest. Resting is thus like using a whetstone to sharpen discernment. Resting the body strengthens the body, and in the same way resting the mind strengthens the mind.

When it comes out this time, now that it has strength, it's like a knife that has been sharpened. The object is the same old object, the discernment is the same old discernment, the person investigating is the same old person, but once we focus our examination, it cuts right through. This time it's like a person who has rested, slept, and eaten at his leisure, and whose knife is fully sharpened. He chops the same old piece of wood, he's the same old person, and it's the same old knife, but it cuts right through with no trouble at all - because the knife is sharp, and the person has strength.

In the same way, the object is the same old object, the discernment is the same old discernment, the person practicing is the same old person, but we've been sharpened. The mind has strength as a reinforcement for

discernment and so things cut right through in no time at all - a big difference from when we hadn't rested in concentration!

Thus concentration and discernment are interrelated. They simply do their work at different times. When the time comes to center the mind, center it. When the time comes to investigate in the area of discernment, give it your all - your full alertness, your full strength. Get to the full Dhamma: the full causes and the full effects. In the same way, when resting, give it a full rest.

Practice these things at separate times. Don't let them interfere with each other - being worried about concentration when examining with discernment, or being preoccupied with the affairs of discernment when entering concentration - for that would be wrong. Whichever work you're going to do, really make it a solid piece of work. This is the right way, the appropriate way - the way Right Concentration really is.

From the teachings of Ajahn Pasanno - On the breath and awareness 'filling, drenching, steeping and pervading' the body

Using the breath, generating awareness and attention on the breath, moving attention and energy, mindfulness through the body, (we are) adjusting to the rhythm of the breathing so that that awareness pervades the body, and the mind…

As the breath comes in, it's really pervading and *steeping* the body, and the mind in that quality of alertness, and attention…

As the breath goes out, to let that awareness and attentiveness to the physical sensation of the breathing fill the body, and fill the mind. Again, there's the sense of *establishing a base*: the breath is the base, and the body is the base…

What comes to mind is that when the Buddha talks of meditation, the images that he uses are grounded in the body, the body experience. In the teachings there is the phrase, that one

fills, drenches, steeps, and pervades his body, with the bliss of solitude;

This is using the body as the basis to be *filling, drenching, steeping, and pervading*, so that the body and the mind are working together.

So that, starting from the very beginning, the first touch of the breath at the tip of the nose, to fill the field of awareness, to pervade it with that sense of attention, of presence, being very present, being very aware of the breath, the sensation, bringing both that attention (and the breath) into the body… as the breath comes in, as the air fills the lungs, the diaphragm moves, the abdomen rises… you're literally filling the body with air, so that it is able to survive, and then breathing out, allowing that to expel and regenerate itself.

In the same way, we fill our minds, our hearts with awareness, and attention… *knowing clearly*,…

This is using the breath, using the body as the vehicle, the means of extending awareness, and creating a presence, being present for the experience of the breath…

From The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing, Commentary by Thich Nhat Hanh

Realizing the Unity of Body and Mind - Methods Three and Four)

During another period of meditation, observe your whole body without discriminating between different parts: "I am breathing in and am aware of my whole body." (Method 3). At this point, let your breathing, your body. and your observing mind all become one. Breathing and body are one. Breathing and mind are one. Mind and body are one. At the time of observation, mind is not an entity which exists independently, outside of your breathing and your body. The boundary between the subject of observation and the object of observation no longer exists. We observe "the body in the body." The mind does not stand outside of the object in order to observe it. The mind is one with the object it observes. This is the first principle-"subject and object are empty (subject and object are not two) which has been developed extensively in the Mahayana tradition.

Practicing this way for 10 or 20 minutes, the flow of your breathing and your body become very calm, and your mind becomes much more at rest. When you first begin these practices, it seems quite rough, like coarsely milled wheat, like riding a horse for the first time, or like the sound of a church bell after its first jarring ring. But the flour becomes finer and finer, the horse rides more and more smoothly, and the sound of the bell becomes more and more beautiful.

The fourth breathing method accompanies you on this path: "I am breathing in and making my whole body calm and at peace." It is like drinking a cool glass of lemonade on a hot day and feeling your body become cool Inside. When you breathe in the air enters your body and calms all the cells of your body. At the same time, each "cell" of your breathing becomes more peaceful and each "cell" of your mind also becomes more peaceful. The three are one and each one is all three. This is the key to meditation.

If the horse trots peacefully, the rider rides peacefully. And the more relaxed the rider feels, the more relaxed the horse becomes. The same is true of the bell, the ear drum of the hearer, and the hearer himself.

Breathing brings the sweet joy of meditation to you. "The sweet joy of meditation" is the great happiness which meditation brings. It is food. If you are nourished by the sweet joy of meditation, you become joyful, fresh, and tolerant, and everyone around you will benefit from your joy.

Although the aim of the fourth method of breathing offered by the Buddha-breathing in and out to make your body calm and at peace-is to bring calmness to the movements of your body, its effect is to bring calmness to your breathing and to your mind also. The calmness of one brings calmness to all three. In the calmness of meditation, discrimination between body and mind does not exist, and you dwell at rest in the state of "body and mind at one." no longer feeling that the subject of meditation exists outside the object of meditation.

From Transformation and Healing, by Thich Nhat Hanh

From the Tenth Exercise

When the practitioner is able to put an end to agitation, desire, and hatred, he sits down in the lotus position and concentrates on his breath, and he feels a sense of ease and freedom. As a result, a feeling of joy arises in his body. You can practice according to the following exercises:

1. I am breathing in and making my whole body calm and at peace. I am breathing out and making my whole body calm and at peace. (Please see again Exercise 4.)

2. I am breathing in and feeling joyful. I am breathing out and feeling joyful. (This is the fifth exercise of the Anapanasati.)

3. I am breathing in and feeling happy. I am breathing out and feeling happy. (This is the sixth exercise of the Anapanasati.)

4. I am breathing in and making my mind happy and at peace. I am breathing out and making my mind happy and at peace. (This is the tenth exercise of the Anapanasati.)

While practicing in this way, the practitioner feels the elements of joy and peace permeate every cell of his body. Please read the following excerpt from the second version:

Like the bath attendant, who, after putting powdered soap into a basin, mixes it with water until the soap paste has water in every part of it, so the practitioner feels the bliss which is born when the desires of the sense realms are put aside, saturate every part of his body.

The feeling of joy that's born when the practitioner lets go of his life of agitation, desire, and hatred will strengthen and penetrate more deeply when he has mastered the way of applying his mind:

Like a spring within a mountain whose clear, pure water flows out and down all sides of that mountain and bubbles up in places where water has not previously entered, saturating the entire mountain, in the same way joy, born during concentration, permeates the whole of the practitioner's body; it is present everywhere.

When the state of happiness is really present, the joy of the mind settles down to allow happiness to become steadier and deeper. For as long as the joy is still there, there goes with it, to a greater or lesser extent, conceptualization and excitement. "Joy" is a translation of the Sanskrit word, piti, and "happiness" is a translation of sukha. The following example

is often used to compare joy with happiness: Someone traveling in the desert who sees a stream of cool water experiences joy. When he drinks the water, he experiences happiness.

Just as the different species of blue, pink, red, and white lotus, which grow up from the bottom of a pond of clear water and appear on the surface of that pond, have their tap roots, subsidiary roots, leaves, and flowers all full of the water of that pond, and there is no part of the plant which does not contain the water, so the feeling of happiness which arises with the disappearance of joy permeates the whole of the practitioner's body, and there is no part which it does not penetrate.

At the time of the meditation, the practitioner feels happy and at peace. He lets his consciousness of this peace and happiness embrace his whole body, so that his body is saturated by it:

Just as someone who puts on a very long robe which reaches from his head to his feet, and there is no part of his body which is not covered by this robe, so the practitioner with a clear, calm mind envelops his whole body in understanding and leaves no part of the body uncovered…

From Inner Strength, by Ajahn Lee

Once we know the various kinds of breath energy, how to make use of them, and how to improve them so that they feel agreeable to the body, we'll develop expertise. We'll become more adept with our sense of the body. Results will arise: a feeling of fullness and satisfaction pervading the entire body…

* * *

In fixing our attention on the breath, the important point is to use our powers of observation and evaluation and to gain a sense of how to alter and adjust the breath so that we can keep it going just right. Only then will we get results that are agreeable to body and mind. Observe how the breath runs along its entire length, from the tip of the nose on down, past the Adam's apple, windpipe, heart, lungs, down to the stomach and intestines. Observe it as it goes from the head, down past your shoulders, ribs, spine, and tail bone. Observe the breath going out the ends of your fingers and toes, and out the entire body through every pore. Imagine that your body is like a candle or a Coleman lantern. The breath is the mantle of the lantern; mindfulness, the fuel that gives off light. Your body, from the skeleton out to the skin, is like the wax of the candle surrounding the wick. We have to try make the mind bright and radiant like a candle if we want to get good results.

* * *

When we sit and meditate, we have to observe the breath as it goes in and out to see what it feels like as it comes in, how it moves or exerts pressure on the different parts of the body, and in what ways it gives rise to a sense of comfort. Is breathing in long and out long easy and comfortable, or is breathing in short and out long easy and comfortable? Is breathing in fast and out fast comfortable, or is breathing in slow and out slow? Is heavy

breathing comfortable, or is light breathing comfortable? We have to use our own powers of observation and evaluation, and gain a sense of how to correct, adjust, and ease the breath so that it's stable, balanced, and just right. If, for example, slow breathing is uncomfortable, adjust it so that it's faster. If long breathing is uncomfortable, change to short breathing. If the breath is too gentle or weak — making you drowsy or your mind drift — breathe more heavily and strongly.

This is like adjusting the air pressure on a Coleman lantern. As soon as the air and the kerosene are mixed in the right proportions, the lantern will give off light at full strength — white and dazzling — able to spread its radiance far. In the same way, as long as mindfulness is firmly wedded to the breath, and we have a sense of how to care for the breath so that it's just right for the various parts of the body, the mind will be stable and one, not flying out after any thoughts or concepts. It will develop a power, a radiance called discernment — or, to call it by its result, knowledge.

* * *

When mindfulness saturates the body the way flame saturates every thread in the mantle of a Coleman lantern, the elements throughout the body work together like a group of people working together on a job: Each person helps a little here and there, and in no time at all, almost effortlessly, the job is done. Just as the mantle of a Coleman lantern whose every thread is soaked in flame becomes light, brilliant, and white, in the same way if you soak your mind in mindfulness and alertness so that it's conscious of the entire body, both body and mind will become buoyant. When you think using the power of mindfulness, your sense of the body will immediately become thoroughly bright, helping to develop both body and mind.

On exercise 7 of the Anapanasati Sutta

The observation of {*vedana-sanna*} *feeling-and-perception* in meditation practice

Whether we practice meditation or not, we all experience sensation, which we then often *interpret*. When we do this in either more obvious or in less recognized ways, we react to what we feel. Trains of thought and further sensation are set in motion; in the past, we have told, and we continue to tell ourselves stories around a certain person, or a place, or a feeling.

What is called 'perception' in the Theravada Tradition is not just the simple awareness of something. *It includes our categorization, our memory, and interpretation of what we see, hear, feel or remember. It includes how we frame the experience, and the stories we tell ourselves. Herein lies an opportunity for greater freedom, inner control, clarity and peace.* Once we are aware, a gap appears. We can choose to be less reactive. We can choose to bring another quality of mind, or another thought or mental attitude to what arises in our experience.

The seventh exercise in the Anapanasati Sutta, which is in the tetrad of feeling, reads, variously,

Breathing in, I am aware of the mind conditioner in me
Breathing out, I am aware of the mind conditioner in me

(in Buddhadasa's Bhikkhu's translation)

or

Breathing in, I am aware of (feeling) conditioning the mind
Breathing out, I am aware of (feeling) conditioning the mind

or,

Breathing in, I am aware of the interaction of feeling and thought in me
Breathing out, I am aware of the interaction of feeling and thought in me

The second group of four exercises set forth by the Buddha, concern primarily *the observation of feelings*, so here, in this step, we are watching:

the dynamic of sensation,

and how our mind responds.

This includes the thoughts that arise, as well as the subsequent sensations.

What we commonly call 'feeling' has an interesting and important place in our experience. In terms of its subtlety, feeling is between body and mind, and it can originate in either. It can begin with a thought, a memory, a plan, or anticipation, or it can arise from the body, and go on developing from there.

In his teachings on the Anapanasati Sutta, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu says here,

What is (this) mental formation (citta sankara) (this mind-conditioner)? How does it manifest? and in what way is it experienced?

Here the mental formation (the creation of states of mind) is perception-and-feeling.

Perception and feeling are called mental formation because they condition the mind.

In the Abhidharma, the teachings on Buddhist psychology, for practical purposes, they deconstruct experiences, looking closely at what they are made up of. They say that what we think of as an emotion is really our thought, and sensation, in sometimes rapid alternation. This offers us a key

to being able to respond more skillfully to the feelings, as sensations or emotions we may have, or wish to cultivate.

For example, in metta and gratitude practice, this relationship between thought and feeling can clearly seen.

Then when it comes to refining the mind, and developing the skills of attention, it's taught that among the main hinderances that arise in meditation are:

attachment to what's pleasant,

aversion to the unpleasant,

and becoming complacent and unaware when meeting neutral sensations.

If we recognize the pleasant as pleasant, the unpleasant as unpleasant, and the neutral as neutral, however, we can then choose to not be attached, averse, or indifferent, which is often our mind's reflexive response to those sensations.

At times, if we are aware, we can catch the stories that are set in motion by a sensation, or the feelings that come from our thinking, and choose to frame things differently. We can meet whatever arises in our thoughts, feelings and memories with love and compassion, forgiveness, and the willingness to live in harmony with ourselves, with others, and with our world. This is very different than being carried along, semi-consciously by the thoughts and feelings that arise and condition each other, rolling on and on endlessly.

It begins with awareness of what is happening within, here, particularly of our feelings (positive, negative and neutral sensations) and our psychological response to them.

Breathing in, I am aware of feeling-and-thought in me,
Breathing out, I am aware of feeling-and-thought in me…

This has many applications, including how we hold memories that arise. When we speak something being 'a trigger' for us, we're referring a reflex-reaction we have, without any choice. We may pass a restaurant we went to with our ex girlfriend, or hear a song enjoyed together; we may recall a place, or a plan that didn't work out, or a disappointment in a friendship or at work. If we watch, we can see the story unfold, with the feelings coming up bringing a psychological response.

It doesn't even have to relate to something that has actually happened. It could be an imagined event or a meeting that can happen in the future. We can work ourselves into a state. All this is quite familiar to most of us. In fact, we just accept it as a part of being a human being, that we will have thoughts and feelings and memories going wherever they will. We accept not really being in control of our experience.

What is left out of this limited understanding of ourselves is the role that our interpretation plays in what we experience. When we frame things a certain way (with *sanna - perception*), we allow our mind and feeling to generate further sensations and thoughts.

Most of this goes on automatically, without our having to give our assent or make an effort. It is like a wheel that's been set in motion, spinning by itself, and then furthered by our habitual reactions. We then wake up with the feeling-result of our stories, and we add to this throughout the day, week, month, year, as our inner reactions continue.

Bringing awareness to this process, and then *choosing* to frame things differently introduces a new element (*Cue the heavenly choir!*) We can see that we don't always have to respond as we did before. We can change our attitude to what happened in the past, or to new experiences that feel one way or another. We can choose to meet whatever arises with love, and

acceptance, with a courageous attitude; with compassion for ourselves and others, with forgiveness, tolerance, patience and even a sense of humor.

Many of our perceptions and those of others in the past may have been partial, or even entirely incorrect. When we stop believing so completely in our interpretations, and following them automatically, we give ourselves more choice in how we are going to live. We don't need to be pushed and pulled around by memories of our past, or by what we will meet today.

The seventh exercise in the Anapanasati Sutta is observing the interaction of feeling, and our responses, seeing how feeling conditions the mind. It offers us a key to greater freedom and well being.

This leads naturally to the next theme for observation as a practice in this Sutta, which is calming feelings and our responses, here called 'the mind conditioner' (citta-sankara).

Not reacting, we settle. Changing the story, or consciously choosing to have a positive response soothes the feelings, and the mind becomes more peaceful. At this point, we have skillfully tamed our responses, and we can go deeper in our study and understanding.

On Upadana - from the teachings of Ajahn Pasanno

Upasika Day: Meditation: Can We Function Without Attachment? (Part two)

October 1st, 2017

When we think of the list that the Buddha gives, of attachment, they come around certain themes, of sense desire, views, the practice of precepts, and the assumptions of self. Then they start branching out into the different ways that it manifests, the root is this type of attachment, in whatever way, shape, or form. Then it ends up with attachments to concerns with our health, our job, home, relationships, children, pets… there are all sorts of things.

With attachment, the Pali word is *upadana* - attachment, clinging, grasping; Ajahn Geoff uses *sustenance*, which is interesting. When we attach to something, we're assuming we're sustaining ourselves. I think it's a really good translation, needs to be fleshed out a bit, but we're actually trying to sustain ourselves, to derive sustenance *from* something - like, say, sense desire.

We're trying to gain some kind of pleasure, gratification, satisfaction, and it's not as if it's not pleasurable, but then the nature of attachment is that it keeps moving, looking for another object, which is why it's so important to understand how this attachment, clinging, upadana works.

Also, another aspect of upadana is this sense of clinging or attachment to things as me or mine. That's the fundamental delusion, that we're always opting to make claims of identity - we identify, say, with sense desire, or with we identify with particular views, opinions, or stances that we make. This is *my view*, and of course, I am right, and when somebody has a contrary view, then what is mine is threatened, and we're off balance.

Especially in terms of meditation, and investigation, are we attached?, or, do we have clinging to something? One of the ways to recognize that is the sense of me and mine, the sense of I that's involved. That makes it very clear - ok - this is attachment.

When we consider the Buddha's teachings on attachment, and the relinquishing of attachment, this is a practical tool for freeing us from suffering. The teachings are there to give us the skill, and ease, for how to live in the world, understanding how we create suffering, and how we can free ourselves from it. The avenues of attachment are a good point of reflection.

It's not that one comes from - which is another view - *I can't have any attachments to anything. If I'm going to be a good Buddhist, I shouldn't have any attachments whatsoever. I've got to free myself from all attachments* - and, basically, you can't do anything, because you're attached.

It's really helpful, and important, the Buddha is always pointing to suffering - cessation of suffering - that's the foundation of the teachings.

In the scriptural language, there is an opposite, or a correlation to upadana, and that's samadana. That's when one holds things rightly. Like in the Thai language, when you take the refuges and precepts - samma tan si - it's like you determine to take, or you determine to pick up, or you make a commitment to - so it's like holding things *rightly.*

That's another lens - upadana is holding things wrongly, creating a problem, making suffering, making a mess out of it; and samadana is holding things rightly, so that they're being of benefit and supporting one's aspiration for peace and happiness, and well being.

It's important to realize that there's these different lenses to see how we hold things.

Ajahn Chah gave a nice example - like when you go into a dark place, or it's nighttime - especially when you're out in the forest here, you hold onto a flashlight. You don't let it go, thinking, aah, I'm not going to be attached to this flashlight. You hold onto it, because it's appropriate to hold onto it until you're out of the dark. If you get off the trail, you'll go rolling down the hill, because you're not attached to your flashlight.

So that's sammadana - you're holding it rightly, you're holding it correctly. Do you have clinging? Do you have upadana? Well no, it's just a flashlight, and you're just using it for a useful purpose.

So you start extrapolating from that - that's what you do, say with right speech, right action, right livelihood, right relationships to the world around you. You have to pick it up and hold it correctly, hold it rightly.

And the same with meditation. You've got to pick up a meditation object, and hold it rightly. We can hold it with clinging, and attachment - *I've got to pay attention to my breath! - can't let anything else through* - you can wind yourself up, with all sorts of tension, and tightness, and then the mind doesn't become peaceful.

Understanding that sense of upadana, attachment, and samadana, how to hold things correctly, how to hold things appropriately (is important).

When we're reflecting on attachment, or on clinging, there is this option to clinging, which is holding things correctly.

The whole book, Mind Like Fire Unbound (by Ajahn Geoff) is mostly about clinging and freedom from clinging, because one of the aspects of the image of fire is that, in order for something to continue burning, fire is said to be caused by the agitation or the excitation of the heat property, and to continue burning, it has to have sustenance - upadana, and it's relationship to its sustenance is one of clinging, or dependence, entrapment.

This is where we come to the unraveling of this clinging, and then the Buddha pointing to the mind having four forms of clinging; and of course, these are just ways of flagging categories, and, you can name your particular preference for how it manifests, and how you proliferate out from there, but those are certain trajectories - clinging to sensuality, clinging to views, clinging to precepts and practices, and clinging to doctrines of the self or assumptions of self.

In each case, the clinging is the passion and desire the mind feels for these things. To overcome this clinging, then, the mind must see not only the drawbacks of these four objects of clinging, but, more importantly, the drawbacks of the act of passion and desire itself.

- that compulsion we have to - *it has to be this way, I need this, I have to be a certain way,* that compulsion is that passion *behind* the clinging. It's hard to separate them out completely, but there is a certain sense…

The mind does that by just following the path of practice that the Buddha lays down, of virtue, of concentration, and discernment. He says,

Virtue provides the joy and freedom from remorse that are essential for concentration. Concentration provides an internal basis of pleasure, rapture, equanimity, and singleness of mind that are not dependent on sensual objects, so that discernment can have the strength and stability it needs to cut through the mind's clingings. Discernment functions by viewing these clingings as part of a causal chain: seeing their origin, their passing away, their allure, the drawbacks of their results, and finally, emancipation from them.

So, it's starting to see things in their context.

Letting Go As a Skillful Means

When it comes to separating from attachment to sense pleasures that bring us suffering as well, Buddhism is very practical. There's a method called simply 'letting go' that anyone can experience the benefits of, which is encouraging every step of the way.

We don't have to give up everything at once, but when we let go even a little, it creates more space inwardly, and some peace as well. In the teachings on meditation, this is a factor that makes it easier to settle the mind, and cultivate clarity.

A skillful means in Buddhism is what gets us from one place to another. It is provisional. Once we see the benefits of letting go of sensuality, and views, and contention, and find greater peace and well being, it leads onward. I especially like how accessible this practice is, and how we can see the results right away.

In Revisiting the Jhanas I wrote that

Nekhama is sometimes translated as relinquishment, renunciation, or letting go. Bhante Gunaratana describes this factor as generosity, but also describes it in his talks as temporarily giving something up. This can be taken all the way up to the renunciation of all of samsara, but there are levels to it along the way that are helpful to know about and to practice.

He says, for example, that we can give up something as simple as a single piece of chocolate, and once we begin looking for attachments, or thoughts and interests we can set aside for a time, we find that we are creating a sense of space, and freeing up our energy to practice.

Bhante makes clear in his book, *Beyond Mindfulness in Plain English*, that we can consider the setting aside of interest or involvements as something

temporary, and provisional, as in, for the purpose of getting us from one place to another.

Until we practice deep meditation and develop insight, we are suspending the activity of the kilesas, or hindrances. We are pacifying them for a time. Their roots are still there in us, and are only removed later. This practice, of jhana, and all that it consists of, is a means to that end, and to the end of all suffering.

Bhante Gunaratana:

Renunciation does not mean renouncing the world, or home, or life. It has a deeper meaning. It simply means any letting go. We can let go of greed, or a piece of chocolate - that is renunciation.

We can let go of an additional pair of shoes when we were thinking of buying them. We can let go of that thought. That is also renunciation.

Renunciation (letting go) covers the minutest thing to the largest thing that we give up.

Renunciation in a deeper sense means having a thought (the mind) that is letting go of things. In meditation, this becomes extremely practical, useful, and meaningful.

When we try to gain concentration, greed can arise. At that moment, even temporarily, we can let go of that greed… That letting go is renunciation. (letting go)

and

Joy and happiness (sukha, well being) arise as a result of suppressing hindrances. It is a joy also to know we are on the right path. Let us try to regain this same joy and

happiness.` The basis is letting go of attachments, and greed, and cultivating wholesome thoughts, of metta, and karuna.

The joy and happiness that then arise is temporary, but they are still very powerful. They support our gaining concentration…

This is so much more skillful than wrestling with our negative, destructive emotions. Setting them aside for a time is do-able, and what's more, it introduces us to other before unimagined possibilities, other paradigms, not thought of before.

We need a method that allows us to approach and actualize a new way of being. Letting go works very well here.

Part of the problem, I think, when it comes to transforming the deeper level of the mind and emotions is the identification one some level with one, the I or the ego who has acted or experienced in the past. Even in a subtle way, this perpetuates suffering of a kind. Ajaan Pasanno said

If there is any hint of self, a position is then taken and the whole realm of samsara unfolds.

The practice of simply letting go as a skillful means avoids all this. It's something we can do and feel the effects of almost immediately, of greater peace and well being.

There's another teaching that relates here, on what they call *the nutriments*. If we can practice *the withdrawal of interest and attention* from the objects of our attachment, the feeling fades. We can do the same with objects of aggression. Withdrawing energy brings relief, and allows us to settle down more deeply. It's like we are withholding the energy these need to grow, and so like a plant we don't water, whatever feelings there are, whether they be of anger, or compulsion, and attachment, whither and then vanish.

We can experience this as an enjoyable, temporary liberation, and this is onward leading. It allows for other possibilities.

It's with good reason that modern teachers warn us of what they call spiritual bypassing. This is where a person avoids what is difficult, and maybe even believes they have overcome that problem, only to have it return. Buddhism is deeper than modern psychology though, and only those who meditate know and experience its deeper benefits.

From letting go, as a provisional means, we are able to settle more deeply, touching peace in a new way, and being nourished by that. Beyond that even, by cultivating insight, we are able to uproot the causes of suffering themselves. In The Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree Buddhadasa Bhikkhu outlines the progressive method in full:

The Buddha spoke first of nekkhamadhatu (the element of renunciation) as the cause for the withdrawal from sensuality;

Seeing nekkhamadhatu, the element of renunciation, is the cause for the withdraw from sensuality because it is its antithesis. Seeing the element that is the antithesis of sensuality is called seeing nekkhamadhatu. Being unconsumed by the fire of sensuality is nekkhamadhatu. The mind that withdraws from sensuality is a mind that contains nekkhamadhatu.

The Buddha wanted us to completely withdraw from those things, to use nekkhamadhatu as the means to withdraw from sensuality, to use arupadhatu (the formless element) as the means to withdraw from absorptions of the fine-material plane, and finally to use nirodhadhatu (the element of cessation) as the means to withdraw from the conditioned, so that all the manifold types of confusion converge in emptiness. (the wisdom realizing liberation)

This is what is offered in full by taking up the skillful means of letting go.

May all beings benefit.

Renunciation is Letting Go With Wisdom and Compassion

When we study religious traditions, and look at our own feelings about teachings, we can see a wide range of responses to this one word, 'renunciation'. At its worst, renunciation has this common reputation for being life denying- an aversion to everything that we know in our heart to be right and beautiful in this world. It feels like it's all loss, and we think, What would be the point of that?, but there's a lot more to letting go, or giving something up than this limiting definition would have us believe.

For me, Buddhism, and all religious traditions are about ending samsaric suffering, and finding meaning and fulfillment in our lives. To that end, naturally, *we're going to want* to abandon the causes of suffering, and everything that holds us back from accomplishing our aims, and those of our beloved family.

Much of what has come down to us with the name 'renunciation' attached to it is what people try to do, and tell others to do, may be well meaning, but it's without wisdom. This is what gives it all bad name, predictably.

Without wisdom- understanding the purpose, *and a complete path* backing up letting go, there's bound to be resistance, and conflict. As we can see, so often when moral principles alone are asserted, there follows hypocrisy, shame and denial, fear, and hostility towards teachings such as these.

We *want*, and we don't want to give up anything. We don't see the point of it, and we snarl like an angry dog when we think someone it trying to take any pleasure at all from us (drinking and drugs, food, sex, sleep, laying around in the sun, and so on)…

I'd like to point out here that we already do have some amount of discriminating thought and wisdom functioning. It's what chooses for us. If we watch throughout the day, we 'renounce' all the time, even if we don't

use this word for it. We think, 'Eh, this is meaningless', or, 'No, thank you', or, Forget *that*'.

This is all well and good, as far as it goes.

But there's a greater pleasure, a higher peace and fulfillment that can be known, This is what we're all looking for, and if not for this, there'd be no point in letting *anything* go.

From his very first teaching, the Buddha asserted that all suffering can be ended, and this is his main point. He taught that freedom can be known, and enjoyed, and shared with others. Once we know this, then the different kinds of letting go make sense, and are naturally appealing. They are nothing less than the expression of wisdom and compassion for ourselves and others.

The foot of the path is relinquishment,
as attachment to food and wealth disappear…

- from the Karma Kagyud Lineage Prayer

Such renunciation, or letting go, happens easily, naturally, on account of clear understanding. We let go joyfully, gratefully, and we find spaciousness and rest there.

Note that *when we renounce* something, it necessarily means that it previously had value for us. After all, we can't let go of something we never had hold of. Maybe it was even the most important thing in our life, and *we changed our mind* about it. We gave it up, decisively. We relinquished it, we thoroughly and comprehensively let it go.

Of course, we have to contend then with our habit energies, which are the currents of our past actions, and those we've inherited from our family, and culture. These can be fearsome at times, and so we rely on accomplished

teachers, saints, and those holy ones whose sole purpose is to help beings like us to achieve our spiritual aims, of complete health and peace.

Enter the Three Trainings - Sila, Samadhi, and Prajna, Ethics, Meditation, and Wisdom

Homage to the Dharma,
that opens the wisdom-eye of beings,
and is the means of removing the poison arrow of latent tendencies

- from Aryasura's Aspiration

Initially, *at the level of ethics*, letting go of what we were previously attached to makes for more peace, and allowing the mind to settle more comfortably in the present;

then, *in meditation*, letting go of attachment, contention and aggression, and other activities facilitates the mind settling more deeply, and becoming clear;

and *on the level of liberating wisdom*, the letting go that happens at the point of insight completes the practice.

Paradoxically, when it comes to the false ego-ideas we produced and held onto tenaciously, with discernment-insight, we see that there is nothing to let go *of*.

As it's said in the Tibetan Tradition, at this point,

Not seeing is perfect seeing,

and the world opens up. A much greater freedom than we could have imagined is here, and there is light, and an all-embracing love.

This is realizing Sila, Samadhi, and Prajna, and this is renunciation at its best.

May we all enter a path
that leads to the complete freedom from suffering
and may we all find peace and fulfillment in this very life

The Benefits of Calm Abiding Meditation, by Geshe Sopa

From Steps on the Path to Enlightenment, Volume 4

A strong aspiration to engage in samatha comes from contemplating the benefits of the practice.

If you see the many benefits of samatha, then you will have strong faith or trust in that practice. So I am not talking about blind faith here; you must actually understand the benefits.

When you see the benefits, from the smallest to the greatest, you will be attracted to practice. As this attraction becomes stronger, the aspiration to practice will come. When you have aspiration, you will have the perseverance to practice with commitment. This is yet another reason why it is important to study and learn about a practice rather than just jumping in and doing it right away.

You will not be interested in doing something if you do not trust that doing it will be helpful. If you do not know all the benefits of the practice, you will not be inspired to do it. Without aspiration, you will not persevere in your practice.

In short, it is important to understand why Samatha is valuable, what its benefits are, what you need to do to attain it, how long it may take to develop, what types of hardships and sacrifices may be involved, and how to address these.

So what are the great benefits of achieving samatha?

First, it counteracts the wild, distracted mind that hampers you on the spiritual path.

Normally you do not have control over your mind. Your mind gets distracted; it goes this way and that, utterly out of your control. When your mind is uncontrolled, the result will be negative actions of body, speech, and mind. When your mind is fully controlled, you will have the desire and ability to engage in virtuous actions and refrain from nonvirtuous activities.

Second, samatha is the basis for a peaceful and enlightened mind. When you achieve samatha, your mind will be happy, content, and filled with delight. Your body also experiences a type of bliss. With this physical and mental pliancy, your mind is suitable for work to achieve the higher goal of enlightenment.

Only on the basis of Samatha can you cultivate real insight into the nature of reality.

The union of samatha and vipaśyana is the true antidote to all your suffering and problems.

It is the foundation for achieving liberation from samsara. Another benefit derived from the cultivation of samatha is supranormal powers that facilitate your ability to help other sentient beings.

Usually we speak of five common or mundane supranormal powers or knowledges that result from samatha: miraculous acts, the divine eye, clairaudience, the knowledge of others' thoughts, recollection of former states, and knowledge of death and rebirth.

Miraculous acts are feats like the ability to turn one body into many, to transform large into small, to fly, to dive into the ground, and to walk on water. These knowledges and powers result from the samatha practice that is common to Buddhists and non-Buddhists.

Even though none of these powers are essential for the attainment of enlightenment, bodhisattvas can use these abilities to work for the benefit of all sentient beings. However, if a practitioner attains these powers but does not have love, compassion, and the realization of emptiness, they may engage in strange activities that have interesting, or even harmful, results.

If right away, as a beginner, you seek out a cave to meditate in but you are without much background knowledge, you may give up your practice quite quickly. However, *if you first build zeal for practice through contemplation of its benefits, your enthusiasm will keep you committed to your practice.* You will not want it to degenerate, so you will focus on its cultivation, and it will increase.

Once you have strong faith in the benefits of Samatha, laziness will subside. You will not want to delay practice even one moment.

In addition, the things that once distracted you will hold less appeal- sometimes yogis forget to eat because they are so engrossed in their meditation practice.

Once you are inspired to practice, hardships seem small compared to the great fruits of cultivating samatha. When you achieve the special joy that accompanies mental pliancy, encouragement to meditate will come from within. You will need no encouragement from others. You will be self-motivated. And yet you will still need to cultivate your enthusiasm for the practice.

Even after attaining samatha, you should urge yourself again and again to remember these teachings so that your motivation does not wane. This is how you produce and maintain faith.

A recommended reading, viewing, and listening list

On Meditation:

A Resource for the Practice of Meditation, by Jason Espada

Thich Nhat Hanh: Breathe!, You Are Alive!

(also published at 'The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing');

A Guide to Walking Meditation

Teachings on Meditation - includes transcripts of his commentaries on gathas

Ajahn Pasanno's 2005 Winter retreat talks, on the Anapanasati Sutta

Ajaan Lee: Keeping the Breath in Mind; Inner Strength

Bokar Rinpoche: Meditation - Advice to Beginners

On the jhanas

Henepola Gunaratana: Beyond Mindfulness in Plain English

Bhante Gunaratana's 2004 Jhana retreat talks

On Samatha:

Gen Lamrimpa: Calming the mind (also published as 'Samatha Meditation)

Geshe Sopa: Steps on the Path, volume 4: Samatha

On Metta:

Jason Espada: Living in Beauty - Buddhist Loving Kindness practice

Sharon Salzberg: Loving kindness

Ajahn Pasanno's 2008 Metta retreat talks

These talks have also been transcribed, and are offered online with the title Abundant, Exalted, Immeasurable.

On Wisdom:

A Key to Buddhist Wisdom Teachings, by Jason Espada

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu: The Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree

Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro: The Island

Thich Nhat Hanh: The Heart of Understanding; The Diamond that Cuts Through Affliction

Wisdom Teachings by Lama Zopa Rinpoche

Teachings on Mahamudra

Great Perfection Teachings, Jason Espada, editor

General Introductions to Buddhism

Thich Nhat Hanh: The Miracle of Mindfulness; The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

Ani Tenzin Palmo: Reflections On A Mountain Lake; Into the Heart of Life

Kenpo Kathar: Dharma Paths

Chagdud Tulku: Gates to Buddhist Practice

Lama Yeshe: Wisdom Energy I and II; The Essence of Tibetan Buddhism; Make Your Mind an Ocean; Becoming Your Own Therapist; The Peaceful Stillness of the Silent Mind; Life, Death, and After Death; Freedom Through Understanding;; Ego, Attachment, and Liberation; Silent Mind, Holy Mind