



Finding
the
Missing
Peace

AJAHN AMARO

A PRIMER OF BUDDHIST MEDITATION

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P R E F A C E

This booklet, describing meditation tools and techniques for beginners in a series of lessons, is based on a six-week series of classes given in Mendocino, California, in 2002.

These lessons describe Buddhist meditation techniques, and the ideas and principles of meditation practice explained in them are certainly within the Buddhist fold, however, these meditation instructions are not intended to be useful or pertinent only to Buddhists. The lessons provide simple tools and techniques that one can use to help make one's life more peaceful, to help one understand oneself and others a little better, and to help one live more harmoniously in the world.

The intent of this booklet and each of these lessons is to provide methods, techniques and principles that anyone can apply within the sphere of his or her own life – whether one is a Humanist, a Christian, a Communist, a Buddhist or a follower of any other belief system. Nothing provided here is directed to trying to convince anyone that Buddhism is right, or to cause anyone to waiver in his or her own faith, whether it's Christianity, Judaism, Islam or any other spiritual path. Nor is the intention to make everyone who uses this booklet into a Buddhist. What is

presented here is simply a set of methods and principles anyone can use to make his or her life better, and the intention is to make each of these six lessons accessible and welcoming for everybody.

What is Meditation?

People have all sorts of ideas about what meditation is, based on a wide variety of experiences and influences. For example, we might have the idea that meditation is about seeing into past lives, reading people's minds, making the mind go off into some sort of blissful state or inhabit some kind of wonderful esoteric realm while we take a break from our busy lives, and so on. Perhaps we have come to believe that meditation will enable us to lose weight or make a lot of money, give us healing powers, or, at least, make us into a wonderfully glorious interesting attractive person who can dazzle people at cocktail parties. We see the word "meditation" in books and magazines. We hear it talked about and discussed on television talk shows. So we can get all kinds of impressions about the purpose of meditation and how you do it. The following is intended to clarify, from the Buddhist perspective and the tradition in which I was trained, that meditation is not really about those kinds of effects.

Certainly some people are said to have the ability to concentrate their minds in such a way that visions arise, or they are able to read other people's minds, or have other similar experiences. But my teacher, Ajahn Chah, was vehement in discouraging us from being interested in

those kinds of experiences. He emphasized that we should approach meditation in the way the Buddha intended it to be used, which was to help us develop qualities of peacefulness and clarity, to learn how to understand our own lives and to learn how to live harmoniously within the world.

This approach is more prosaic and more practical than some of the other motivations for meditation. The intent behind these lessons and also what is meant by “meditation” is to experience for oneself a blend of the qualities of peacefulness, wisdom, and understanding; these are the key elements. These lessons are not aimed at teaching any kind of special abilities. There is also no promise that after these six lessons one will be more beautiful, radiant, attractive, or debt-free. Rather, the intent is more that those who use these lessons will perhaps understand their lives a little better, be able to live a little more in peace, get along with their families and those that they work with in a better way, and to wake up to the way life actually is – as it takes shape around us and within us. The intent is that there will be an understanding and therefore a deeper harmonization with life. That’s what is really meant by “meditation” here, what these lessons use the word to refer to.

Using the Booklet and the Lessons

There is a progression designed into the presentation of the six lessons. The different themes in each of the lessons link into the next in a fairly neat chain, but each lesson

can also stand on its own. So if one skips a lesson along the way, a crucial piece is not lost. It's not like skipping three chapters of a novel and losing the plot entirely. Ideally, each of the individual lessons stands alone and brings its own teachings and its own instruction and helpful qualities. If one does skip a lesson, one can certainly go back to where one left off and nothing crucial will be lost. It is recommended, though, that one progress through the lessons in sequence, or go back and pick up what was skipped at some point.

Take What is Useful

One of the main principles of Buddhism is that no teachings that are given are necessarily to be believed in or taken on as true out of hand. The encouragement the Buddha always gave was to investigate the teachings and then use them and see if they work for oneself. If they do work, if they bring benefit, then continue to apply them. If they don't work, or they don't have meaning, or one finds them to be wrong, then just put them aside and leave them.

These lessons are provided in that spirit. If you find something helpful and beneficial from them, please take it and use it. If you find something not beneficial or confusing or useless, please just leave it aside.

Ajahn Amaro
Amaravati Buddhist Monastery
2019



LESSON

ONE

POSTURE AND FOCUS

The themes for the first lesson are posture and focus, the foundation for a beneficial meditation practice. These elements are the main starting point for meditation practice, and they apply to both the mind and the body.

It is easy to have the impression, whether reading or hearing or thinking about meditation, that the practice is concerned simply with the mind: we think of it primarily in terms of a mental activity. In today's culture, we see more and more advertisements using images of people sitting cross-legged with their eyes closed as a symbol for the meditation process – the cross-legged, closed-eyed yogi. If one has attempted meditation before, however, one realizes very quickly that as soon as we try to sit like the person in the advertisements – in that sort of upright, ever so attentive, beautifully-balanced posture – that, first of all, the legs need a little persuading to get into that position. And, once the legs are crossed and one is holding

the body upright, within a few minutes one encounters a protest emanating from the knee joints, or from the back or the hip joints. It becomes very apparent, very quickly, that the body is involved with the meditation – it's not just something that is a function of the mind.

This is not an accidental and unfortunate circumstance – at least from the traditional Buddhist perspective. One sees right from the very beginning that the training, which is what meditation is, involves both body and mind. So, just as meditation does not relate solely to the mind, “posture” refers not just to physical posture, but also to mental posture. And similarly, the idea of “focus” involves both the body and the mind. Essentially, for both posture and focus, one is aspiring to cultivate a quality of balance of two particular elements: an element of energy or alertness, balanced with the element of relaxation, calmness or peacefulness. For example, the meditation posture we see most commonly, such as in sitting Buddha images, in which the Buddha sits cross-legged with his back upright, has been found to be one of the ideal ways to achieve the balance of energy and relaxation, which in turn assists in development of the qualities of calmness, wisdom and attention.

Energy and Relaxation

When we try to meditate, it is easy for us to veer unconsciously to the extremes, just as when learning to ride a bicycle at first we wobble and lurch from side to side. One such extreme is experienced when the body

and the mind are too energized to establish the qualities of calmness and attention. They can be very charged or excited, with the mind revved up, very interested or alert, and the body restless. This is usually caused by something that is frightening or exciting. In the usual run of events the quality of arousal or alertness is brought about by some kind of emotionally charged stimulus.

Conversely, relaxation is generally epitomized by the image of being flopped in an armchair. It's a lazy Sunday afternoon and the feet are up, and maybe there's music playing in the background or the TV is on. One is not really paying attention; the mind is dozing and drifting, and the mind and body are completely relaxed. There is an intrinsic implication of being half-conscious, of being not quite with it, or being half asleep. Relaxation is generally viewed as just switching off.

From a Buddhist perspective, the idea is to find that quality of being, that quality of mind and body in which the elements of relaxation and energy are both maximized and in balance with each other. It is a principle of Buddhism – and also what one finds with investigation, when one looks at the mind – that when one learns to calm the mind and look into its nature deeply, it becomes more and more alert *and* more and more peaceful. The attention is attuned to the reality of the present much more acutely. Briefly, the more and more clearly one sees the way things are, the more one recognizes that the fundamental nature of mind is intrinsically both completely awake and completely peaceful, simultaneously. The two

do not occlude each other; they are qualities that can exist simultaneously.

In some ways it goes against our common sense, or our habitual experience, to think of being both alert and relaxed at the same time. We feel that we have to be one or the other. But when one looks at the mind's nature, when one looks very closely and holds the attention on the fundamental nature of mind and body, one experiences the mind as completely alert, utterly attentive and wide awake, and also completely peaceful.

When one is totally new to meditation and new to Buddhism, one must take this as an article of faith, or approach it as a suggestion. The spirit of these lessons is that one can take what is said and experiment, find out for oneself, consider it for the time being as a sort of working hypothesis.

It may be easier to grasp this principle while working with the physical posture, to see its validity on a physical level. If one has practised yoga, one may have a natural sense of this. Yoga practitioners may find when crossing the legs, closing the eyes and paying attention to the body that it's possible to hold the body in an upright position. One can hold the spine quite straight, and the posture has an upright, dignified quality. The base of the spine is pulled in slightly, the chest is opened up a little, the eyes are gently closed. The posture has an energetic quality that is achieved without holding the back rigid and tense; it's not as if one had a bolt of electricity running up through the spine or had just been dunked into icy water. Within

the feeling of uprightness – just as with any yoga pose – the body relaxes into the pose. The pose is the framework, and within that framework, one can soften the body. It's the opposite of, for example, a sculptor pouring the wet plaster of Paris into a mold which then hardens. With meditation, one starts with the contents hard and then relaxes, and there can be an extraordinary softness, an ease within the body even though it's held in this firm and steady upright posture.

These are the elements of energy and relaxation that find balance with each other. If one tries to analyze with the rational mind, it may be difficult to understand this balance; it doesn't seem to make sense. But feeling it with the body, one can recognize, "Oh yes, this is where I'm wide awake, the body is alert – energized – but yes, I can relax." This doesn't mean to relax the posture so that we are flopping over, crumpling into a heap, the spine bending, the nose on the carpet! There is a way the framework of the posture can sustain itself, and then within that there is ease, relaxation and softening.

At the end of this chapter is a guided meditation that can be used to experiment with this balance of energy and relaxation and see how it can be attained, to experience it, to see if it feels right intuitively. The practice is designed to help one feel both alert and awake and yet at ease. As one begins to discover these qualities in the body, that process enables one to discover and establish those qualities in the mind, and that then informs the relationship between the body and the mind ever more deeply.

The Purpose of Meditation

With meditation, one starts out in slightly forced or contrived ways to achieve that balance of body and mind. One decides to meditate or decides to put the body into a posture, or one tries to be concentrated or to be peaceful.

It's important to understand, however, that one is not trying to create some sort of unnatural state. The purpose is to bring these aspects of life – the body and the mind – into alignment with their fundamental nature. It's not about trying to *become*, to make the essence of the mind *become* peaceful or alert. From the Buddhist perspective, that's already the case. It is already utterly peaceful, utterly pure, utterly awake, it has always been alert and peaceful and wise and kind. But those qualities get occluded – covered over and obscured – by the flow of one's days and activities: waking, sleeping, engaging with others, and the ten thousand things that we do. Meditation is not about trying to create something special, to get to a special state; meditation is more about uncovering what has always been and always is here. One is simply trying to bring the external conditions into alignment with that fundamental reality of human nature.

These lessons don't require taking this on faith. The goal is to discover during the course of these lessons that, when one looks and sees, when one searches inside using meditation, the practice will enable one to calm down, to focus attention on the present. By looking and seeing, over and over again, one finds the qualities of peace and clarity within the heart that underlie everything, that

are always present. By seeing this over and over again, faith in that reality arises on its own. By seeing for oneself that whenever the mind is not caught up in wondering about the future or ruminating about the past (planning a shopping trip, reworking plans for the next holiday or remembering the last one, etc.), when one pays attention to the moment and relaxes and sees clearly, there is peacefulness, purity, wakefulness, and a kind of bright, radiant quality to the heart. With the evidence of one's own experience slowly seeping through, finally one begins to see and trust that underneath all this there is a pure, radiant, peaceful quality.

Mental Posture

Mental posture is the attitude with which one works with the mind in meditation. One might be inclined to believe that it is easy to get the mind to slow down and be peaceful. But in sitting down to meditate, one may find that the mind is chattering away, proliferating thoughts about this, that and the other thing, recreating the past, planning for the future, forming opinions about everything. One may be tempted to create a division between oneself and one's mind, between the meditator, trying to be peaceful, and the mind, the chattering maniac that keeps commenting on everything. One can unconsciously develop a combative attitude towards the mind, viewing the thinking mind and stray thoughts, emotions and reactivity as the enemy. One may try to make the mind shut up and behave, unconsciously drifting

into a very Draconian, authoritarian, fascist mentality towards one's own mind. Even if one is generally peaceful – dedicated to harmlessness, peacefulness and kindness on the social and political level – when it comes to dealing with the mind, one's attitude can become completely repressive. This is a bit of an exaggeration, but one can get very contentious with the mind, and meditation can therefore become very stressful.

It is very important when trying to calm the mind to bring the attention to the present, to develop these qualities of relaxation and focused energy, so that one works with the mind and body in a very collaborative way. It is important not to set up the mind as something one has to force into obedience. Working with the mind is like working with children or animals. If one tries to force a pony or horse to behave, one is bound to end up on the ground very quickly! With children, as soon as one gets forceful and belligerent and domineering, the child ends up in a stressful state of tears very quickly. A tense and painful relationship develops, and everybody loses. There may be some obedience with a certain begrudging compliance, but as soon as one's back is turned or there is an opportunity, the system will crack; in any event, both the child and oneself feel miserable, all because of the tension that's been created through this aggressive interchange.

On the other hand, there is a big difference when we work collaboratively, for example, when collaborating with children to help them learn to use the potty or write or follow the rules of the house or clean up after

themselves, or working with an animal's tendencies and guiding and training it with love. One uses persistence and strength, but comes from a place of basic affection and love and cooperation. One shows a quality of kindness, not force. In Buddhism it's a standard principle that the way that one does things is unified completely with the result that one gets. The means and the end are unified, so that if one uses forceful or violent or aggressive means, then the outcome will be painful and stressful. The cause and effect are necessarily tied to each other. So, when working with the mind, one works with effort, with energy, and with persistence, but one works *with* the energies and tendencies of the mind, with a fundamentally affectionate and collaborative attitude. The mind is one's friend, not an opponent that has to be beaten into submission.

Physical Posture

In the basic meditation posture, one is seated with the body upright – this may be on the floor, while sitting cross-legged on a cushion or kneeling on a meditation bench – however, one need not sit on the floor, sitting on a chair or a stool is also fine. The main thing is to find a posture in which one can sit still for at least half an hour.

On the physical level, the main thing to pay attention to is the spine, which should be straight. When sitting in a chair, don't lean against the back of the chair but try to hold the body upright. Use the spine as the centre-piece of the sitting posture. The spine is the axis of the world in

meditation; it is the central element around which all the rest revolves or is arranged.

Starting to Meditate

To start a period of meditation, sit down and bring the attention into the body. Feel how the body is holding itself, using the instructions given in the guided meditation at the end of this chapter, noting where there is tension or heaviness, gently adjust the body, moving towards the qualities of uprightness and inner relaxation.

After spending a bit of time focusing on the posture, start sweeping the attention through the body from the top of the head down to the feet and back up a few times, just to get acquainted with what the body is feeling. What sort of energy does the body have? What kind of posture is it holding?

Starting with that raw material, use the loving attention of the meditation to help guide the body towards a more refined, balanced quality of the upright posture where there is energy and relaxation combined harmoniously with each other. Our approach to training ourselves in the posture should be similar to, for example, the attitude we bring towards housebreaking a puppy or teaching a child how to write. We take the raw material of the child, the paper and pencil, and the child's hand and then gently show how it's done. Similarly, with gentle patience and application, slowly train the body. Just as with the child in the example, we are taking the raw material and guiding it towards something that's more beneficial for the body, for the mind.

Meditation Techniques

The main point of meditation is training the attention to focus on the present moment. It is easy to miss the fact that reality only happens here and now, in the present. The past is a memory and the future is unknown, but here in the present is where life actually takes place. If the mind is constantly wandering off to an imaginary past and an imaginary future, one misses a lot of one's life.

Many meditation techniques are taught in the Buddhist tradition. Most of them employ a training of bringing the attention to the present moment.

There are many objects of focus one can use to bring that about, what are called in Buddhist jargon "meditation objects." There are words or phrases one can repeat, such as a mantra. One can visualize an image; for example, some techniques involve using visualization of a particular coloured light or shape. One can use physical feelings. One can follow the practice of sweeping the attention through the body for the whole meditation period, using the sensations throughout the body as a focal point.

Probably the most commonly used, accessible, and helpful focus of meditation practice is the simple rhythm of the breath. The point of a meditation object is to help bring attention to the present. If one has to remember a word, then one has to use the conceptual mind to create it – it is the same with generating a light as a meditation object. But simply by being alive, the body generates the breath, so it's not something that has to be specially created. Also, it's not something that grabs the attention, like a favourite

magazine or a gripping spy novel. Magazines and novels draw the attention, but the attention is scattered, drawn towards the images, the plot, the turning of the pages. This is a kind of attention that is not very conducive to peacefulness.

The breath is a simple object, and it is calming. It does not leap up and grab the attention like an advertisement or an interesting story or compelling music, so one must make an effort to attend to it. It requires the meditator to rouse the heart to attend to it, because it's not very gripping. Imagine a TV program that just showed somebody breathing. It would be like one of those Andy Warhol movies of someone sleeping for eight hours. It might appeal to a certain kind of audience, but to most people it would not be very interesting. Similarly, looking at the breath one might think, "That's not very interesting." But just making the effort to attend to the simple, the normal, the familiar, the peaceful, serves the meditator very well in helping to cultivate the quality of acute attention to the present moment in ordinary everyday life.

When one trains oneself to attend to the peaceful, one steers away from the habit of only being attentive when one is frightened, excited, stimulated, lustful, full of irritation, etc. When something is not exciting or interesting, one generally drifts off into the imagination and conjures up dream worlds.

By focusing on the breath, using that simple natural feeling as a focal point or an anchor for the attention, a blend of ever-present simplicity and peacefulness imbues

the mind. When the mind begins to settle on the breath, when there's more of a quality of focus, one can be less forced or rigid about it. But in the beginning, one must pick up the attention and place it consciously on the breath. Before starting a meditation session, it might be useful to state the intention to focus on the breath and say to oneself something like: "For half an hour, after I've got my body settled and the posture well established, I'm going to focus my attention on the breath."

How to Work with the Breath

There are all kinds of different methods that one can use with the breath. Different practices, such as Hatha Yoga, have techniques like *pranayama* in which the practitioner alters the breath in particular ways. In some forms of meditation or relaxation practices, there are also techniques in which one breathes very deeply, or very slowly, or changes the breath in different ways, such as by hyperventilating or making a seamless continuum of the breathing process by having each inhalation and exhalation follow each other immediately, allowing no pause between them. One can also read all sorts of symbolism into the breath. In some traditions or scriptures, one can read about the breath being the rhythm of the universe or the cosmic wave of *prāna*.

However, in this form of Buddhist meditation, one does not look at the cosmic, symbolic aspects of the breath or try to bring about any sort of energetic effects with the breath. One simply takes the natural rhythm of the breath

as it happens to flow, whether it's short or long, deep or shallow, whether it's a consistent rhythm or changes over and over; however the breath happens to come is accepted and used as the object of meditation. One stays with the breath just as it is, letting the rhythm and the feeling of the breath, and all the different feelings of the body, be as they are. The attention focuses on the simple cluster of feelings that embodies the process of breathing, and then one invites the attention to settle there. This will be explored further in the guided meditation and in the lessons that follow.

The mind can be very agitated or quite peaceful; the mind can calm down quite quickly or resist calming down. One cannot control these things, and there's no hard and fast rule about how meditation will work at any given time. People vary, situations vary, and moods vary. However, as a general rule, the more one trains the attention to settle with the breath, the easier it becomes to do. Making the effort to develop this skill with application and persistence, with constant repetition, leads to the practice slowly sinking in, and one begins to train the heart to be more clearly attentive to the natural flow of the breath. After practising for some time, the attention can stay with the breath without wandering off into thought or distraction too much. One is able to stay focused with the attention resting on the breathing.

When the attention moves off the breath or is drawn to, for example, a noise or to something irritating, instead of getting frustrated or following the feeling of irritation,

one is able to recognize that the attention has wandered off to thinking about the noise and then possibly has moved off onto other things from there. Then, with great gentleness and patience, one lets go of whatever it is the mind has grabbed hold of, such as the plan for next week, the memory of the holiday, an argument with a child, and comes back to the feeling of the breath again. When one realizes that one has lost the connection with the breath, there is forgiveness and a readiness to begin again. No matter how many times we drift away like this, the present moment never gives up on us. The present moment is the ultimate faithful companion. No matter how many times one wanders off, it's always here to come back to. Each time, one wakes up, lets go, and comes back to the present.

Insight Meditation

As time goes by and one is better able to keep the attention steadily with the breath, one finds that the mind has the ability to stay in the present moment without having to focus on the breath at all. The breath is there, but the mind gives up its wandering and is quite happy to be alert, open, attentive and accepting of the present.

The breath has been what one has used as an anchor to bring the attention to the present. When the mind rests easily with the present, one can let go of the breath as a special object. The whole of the present moment then becomes the focus. This is because the point of the exercise is not to become an expert breather or someone

who is totally obsessed with the breath. The point is to train the attention to focus on the present.

As a result of this training, there is an open-hearted awareness of whatever is arising in the present moment. This includes the feelings of the body, sounds, thoughts, and emotions that might arise. The training is to let them come, let them take their shape, perform their function, and then dissolve and fade away.

This dimension of meditation is vipassanā or “insight meditation.” With insight meditation, one begins to train the mind and heart to be aware and to have insight into the fundamental nature of all experience. One begins to see that in every moment there is an arising, an appearance, an abiding and a disappearance of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought, feeling, emotion. It appears that there is an ongoing flow of all these different dimensions of life. These sensations arise, we experience them, and then they change. But within all of that, and around all of that, there can be a quality of all-embracing awareness, a quality of knowing that is attentive to that, attuned to what is going on, but not reactive to it.

This awareness is not caught up in the flow of experience. One is able to see clearly what is going on. One can understand more and more fully how the heart gets entangled in the liked, the disliked, the wanted, the unwanted, the pleasant, the painful, the beautiful, the ugly, in ideas of past and future, self and other. One begins to see how solid one has made all of these concepts. And one trains the heart to start to let go, to not get entangled and identified with those qualities in the

same habitual way. This is called “insight.” One sees that we’re continually and habitually fooled by aspects of the world around us, or the feelings within us, or the way we perceive ourselves and others to be. But when one looks closely and uses the meditation to be very still and attend very clearly and closely to what experience is, one begins to see that experience is constantly changing and fluid. It also becomes clear that any single experience cannot really satisfy.

Or one recognizes that irritation, for example, is just a feeling, and there is no need to make anything out of it.

Through this process the heart becomes more and more at ease, more and more unrattled by the flow of the experience of life. Usually in daily life, we are reactive; instead, through practising meditation, we become more responsive. The lessons learned in meditation then transfer into everyday life. One is able to better respond to and be attuned to life. When there is something to do, one simply does it; if there is nothing to do, one can hold back. One no longer just reacts blindly. Habitually, when something is attractive, we grab it; when something is irritating, we reject it, get rid of it. But with meditation, one is much more aware of habitual feelings and sees what leads to benefit for oneself and others and, in a similar way, what leads to harm.

In the process of meditation, deliberately letting go of the breath and trying to embody this quality of insight is like being in a boat: One pulls up the anchor and thinks there’s not much of a current or too much of a tide, but there may be more pull on the boat than one realizes.

After pulling up the anchor, one may suddenly find oneself drifting towards a reef. The solution is to put the anchor down again to avoid a collision. In meditation practice, this is similar to letting go of the breath and trying to allow the heart to be open to the flow of experience. It may happen that one gets swept up, caught up in a train of thought when initially the intention was to watch that flow of thought. Before one realizes it, one is carried away and borne upon it, swept up in that feeling. When you find that happening, simply refocus on the breath and go back to the posture; see how you're holding the body. Are you slumped over? Have you tensed up? Bring the quality of balance back into the posture. Let the power of attention itself help to bring about that realignment. Focus on the breath again to help bring the attention back to the present and to calm everything down a little. Be more focused and attentive. Then, when the qualities of stability in the posture and the focus of the attention are re-established in the present moment, let go of the breath and allow the whole field of the heart and mind to be open to the flow of experience as it comes.

The point is to nudge this training of the heart gently towards being simply open to the present moment, to be alert and aware of the flow of experience – open without any kind of particular bias to the way in which experience arises, takes shape, and ceases. At the same time it is important not to be too idealistic, thinking that one should feel, think, or be a particular way. Lastly, we need to notice if we merely have the idea that we are “doing vipassanā,” meanwhile neglecting the fact that we are

actually caught up in thinking and drifting all over the place, the mind chattering vigorously, and with no real meditation going on at all. This is what is called “vipassa-think” – the mind is completely swept away in a morass of mental activity.

The goal is to learn from what is going on, to see and judge for oneself and adjust the meditation as needed. One must realize for oneself the right approach and make appropriate adjustments. The intention is to move towards the quality of balance, through attention to the present, towards a non-grasping openness. The idea is to not grasp anything or reject anything, but to attune the heart to the here and now.

Using the following guided meditation, you will see that there are many different aspects to meditation. Meditation is a very simple thing in some ways, but it can also be very involved, due to the complexities of the mind.

The Most Beneficial Attitude

The attitude and spirit with which one enters meditation is extremely important. There is no such thing as a “good” or “bad” meditation. But if the mind is very peaceful and still and bright, there may be a tendency to think one is having a “great” meditation. Conversely, one may be sitting and writhing in agony, be confused and angry and upset, and there may be a tendency to think that this is a “terrible” meditation. But the point is to learn from whatever is experienced. One learns from painful, difficult experiences as well as from peaceful, bright, clear and

beautiful experiences. It's important to bear this in mind when meditating and to be patient when working with chaotic mind-states by recognizing that sometimes this is the nature of the mind. Even a crazy mind-state begins and ends; these states come and go. One can develop wisdom and insight from the painful. Also, if something in experience is beautiful and delightful, one can turn it into a problem by attaching to it, trying to replicate it, or being proud of it, or thinking that one has attained something. Even though it was good and pure and beautiful in the beginning, it can be turned into a source of suffering and an ego-conceit.

The point is to learn from whatever is experienced, whether it's liked or disliked, beautiful or ugly. Everything will teach us if we let it. That is one of the essential principles of meditation; the point is what is learned, not the particular subjective experiences one has along the way.



GUIDED MEDITATION

ONE

Posture

Begin with the intention to slow yourself down. Find a posture that is comfortable to you, whether you're sitting on a chair, on a stool, or cross-legged on a cushion. Find a way that the body can be well balanced, steady and comfortable for about a half hour.

Begin by turning the attention inwards, into the body. Before trying to do anything with the body, take a moment just to notice how the body feels. What is its mood? Heavy? Tense? Hot? Cold? Free from pain? Uncomfortable? Whatever it might be, just take a moment to discern how the body feels. There's no right or wrong way for the body to feel. The goal is to be acquainted with the body and how it feels, to get to know what you're starting with, what's the raw material that you're working with.

Bring the attention to the spine; allow the body to straighten without being tense, rigid, or tight. Hold the body just like a flower growing up or a tall redwood tree reaching up from the forest floor; naturally firm, strong, growing upwards. Feel the body straighten and grow in this way, like a tall tree. It's as though the body has its own central firm trunk and the

smaller and larger branches are spread all around it, with the leaves delicately arrayed at the ends of the twigs. Similarly, the spine is the trunk of our body. So then just let the rest of the body relax around that, just like the branches hang easily along the sides of the tree and the twigs and the leaves and needles surround the firm, central column. Just let the whole rest of the body relax and be at ease, free from tension.

Body Scan

Then, starting with the feelings in the face and the head, systematically sweep through the body to help sustain this quality of relaxation throughout your whole being. First, notice the feelings, the sensations in the face, the forehead, around the eyes. Is there any tension or tightness there? Consciously let those muscles relax.

Feeling the sensations around the mouth and the jaw... how does it feel there? Notice if there's any kind of tension or tightness. Is the jaw clenched? Consciously let everything soften and let any tightness dissolve.

Begin to feel this wave of gentle relaxation flowing down through the body, just like the warmth from sunlight flowing down from the top of the tree. Down through all the branches and twigs and leaves to the very extremities. Feel this quality of everything softening and relaxing, like a wave of gentle warmth flowing down through the whole system. Down from the head and the face... down into the neck... to the shoulders... consciously allowing them to drop a little, to be free from tightness... softening... loosening... As the muscles relax and soften, notice how that feels. What is the mood? How is that mood affected? How does the heart feel as the body loosens up and softens and melts?

Following the flow of relaxation down through the arms... the shoulders... the upper arms... the elbows. All the way down to the wrists and hands... to the fingertips. Whatever tension or tightness, stiffness you feel, consciously let everything loosen and soften... letting that tension dissolve. Give yourself permission to be at ease, not having to sustain any kind of anxiety.

Coming to the trunk of the body, feel the sensations of the chest... letting it open up a little more, as if the heart area were like the bud of a flower. Letting the shoulders be drawn back a little... letting the chest be a bit more open, like the bud slowly unfurling or bursting open... a flower blooming. Allowing yourself to breathe a little more easily.

Follow this flow of relaxation in the chest down through the abdomen... the solar plexus. Notice if you hold a knot or a ball of tightness in the belly – in the solar plexus area. Anxiety can live there like a tangle of tension. Consciously let yourself relax that ball of tension... let the belly loosen and spread. This is not the time for “abs of steel,” but rather for abs of jelly. So let everything loosen... spread... be at ease. There’s nothing to hold in... nothing to tighten.

As you do this consciously, notice the change, the effect this has on the mood. When you allow the solar plexus to relax, what happens to the heart? How do you feel?

Let the attention flow down from the abdomen to the pelvis... through the hip joints. Notice any tightness or rigidity there. Let the tendons loosen and soften. Let the legs drop a little. Feel this wave of relaxation flowing down through the legs... the thighs... the knees... all the way to the feet and the toes. Let the attention soak down and spread down through the

whole body... into every corner... every inch of the body. Let the whole system be perfectly at ease and settled. Feel the presence of the whole body... solid, calm, stable, at ease.

Over the next minute or two, allow the attention to sweep up and down through the body... here and there... wherever you notice that any kind of tension or tightness has reasserted itself. Perhaps, while you were relaxing your stomach, the eyes tightened up again; you're relaxing your knees, and the shoulders tightened up. Go to the spots where you find any tension and let the mind rest at that point. Let the power of loving awareness loosen the knots like a heat lamp. Stay with that area. Let everything soften and relax. And then move on.

Get to know your whole body, and guide it towards ease and relaxation.

Narrowing the Attention by Focusing on the Breath

There may be a tendency for the mind to drift and wander. See how easily it gets caught... snagged by this or that and swept away. So we take a simple object, and train the mind to attend to the present moment. Perceive the presence of the body here in the space of awareness, and then, among all the feelings of the body, narrow the attention down to focus on the little cluster of feeling which is the rhythm of the breath. Don't try to change the breath in any way. Don't do anything special with it. Just feel the body breathing according to its own rhythm. Let that simple pattern, that simple cluster of feelings, be right here at the very centre of attention, like the pattern at the heart of a mandala.

For this period of time, make the resolution: “Right now I’m not interested in anything else... any great ideas... any plans, projects, worries, arguments, memories or in sounds from the world around me. All that can be gently laid aside. Right now, all I’m interested in is the simple rhythm of my own breathing.” All the rest can be picked up later if need be.

Right now, for these few minutes, let the breath be the very centre of attention. Simply follow the sensations... the in-breath and the out-breath as they come and go. Wherever you feel them strongly... in the chest or the diaphragm... the tip of the nose... the throat. Let that rhythm be what teaches you... what guides you. Let the attention settle upon that... gently... firmly... with ease.

Bring the Attention Back with the Breath

It’s quite natural for the attention to wander. The breath is a subtle, unexciting presence. Use this as an opportunity to practise kindness and patience. You fail, you lose your focus. The mind gets distracted, carried away by a feeling in the body. There is doubt, or the mind recalls some conflict, or time simply passes and off the mind goes, telling its stories. As soon as you notice that the mind has drifted off, or grabbed hold of a passing thought, very patiently and very gently let it go. Let the out-breath carry the distraction away. Use the natural relaxing quality of the out-breath as a sigh of relief. Just release it with a gentle “aaaaaaah.” No matter how urgent the issue, no matter how exciting the idea, no matter how indignant the emotion. Use the “aaaaaaahhh” as soon as you notice the mind is distracted. Just wrap it up in the breath and release it.

Relinquish it. Let it flow away. Then, use the natural energizing, focusing quality of the next in-breath to begin again, to re-establish that quality of attention.

The very texture and qualities of the breath itself help to bring together the dimensions of energy and relaxation. These qualities are twinned, manifested, embodied in the breath itself. Existing side by side, just like the flexibility and firmness of a tree. Trees are firm and upright and strong, but they also bend in the wind. They need both qualities.

So when you lose focus, and then realize that you have lost focus, just let go. Release whatever it is the mind has grabbed hold of. Come back to the breath. With the inhalation, begin again.

When your mind wanders, don't criticize or punish yourself. Meditation is a way of learning how to fail perfectly – learning how to lose focus, to recognize that and let go of the distraction completely, and begin again. Nothing is lost. There is no blame. Just be glad to be back with the reality of the here and now. Over and over, simply training the heart to recognize that quality of distraction... knowing it... breathing out... releasing whatever it is the mind has grabbed. Beginning again.

Expand the Attention

If you find the mind is settling and becoming more steady, resting more easily with the breath, then allow the breath to be just a part of the whole array of feelings you're experiencing in the present moment. Just as you focused on narrowing the attention onto the breath, stretch the horizon to the whole vast field of awareness. Let it expand out again. Don't be

particular about what objects you attend to as they arise in the present moment. Let the whole moment be the object of attention, whether it's a sound or a feeling in the body, an idea, or the breath. Whatever it might be, just let the whole flow, the pattern of experience, crystallize into shape, be experienced, and dissolve. So there's a flowing of perceptions, but yet there's a quality of awareness. Rest the heart in this aspect of knowing, this quality of knowing. As different things come up and change, as they appear and disappear, use this reflection: "This is changing. This is not really me, or mine. This is an image appearing in consciousness... a sound... an event... a thought.

"This is not really who and what I am. It doesn't really belong to me. It's just an aspect of the passing show."

Be that quality of knowing. Allow it all to flow through.

Monitoring Your Experience

If the mind is busy and tending to get caught up, stay with the breath. If the currents are strong and the tide is pulling, keep the anchor down. It's best to respond appropriately to the conditions you are experiencing rather than just follow a pre-made formula. If you try to let go of the breath and the mind is swept away, then go back to the breath; put the anchor down. You're simply not steady enough yet. You have to judge for yourself.

Simply be aware that if the mind is steady, if the attention is stable, you can let the breath be part of the whole flow of experience and let the moment itself be the focus of attention... the whole moment. The heart embraces the whole thing... grasping nothing... rejecting nothing. Receiving

everything with affection and letting it go with compassion.
Releasing it.

End the meditation by opening your eyes and stretching
your legs.

End of Meditation



QUESTION AND ANSWER

ONE

Q: I heard that meditation is supposed to empty your mind, free your mind of thoughts. Is that right?

A: That is certainly one effect that meditation can have and, admittedly, having a mind free of thinking can be a very delightful experience. That said, however, it would be a big mistake to say that ultimate happiness or peace is synonymous with not thinking.

In Buddhist psychology “thought” is just another sense object like “sound” or “visible form” and, just as we can hear or see an object without there being any kind of delusion or disharmony within us on account of that, so it is also with thought. There can be a thought in the mind but it can be known clearly and completely for what it is – it is not intrinsically an intrusion on our peace of mind.

What makes thoughts problematic for most of us is that we are compulsively prone to believing in their contents – their stories and value-judgments – so maintaining any kind of real objectivity with thought, as we might be able to do with other sense objects like sight or sound or smell or taste or touch, seems like an impossibility. Thought seems to be in a totally different category, although in truth it’s not.

With time and the skilful development of meditation, we might well be able to learn to focus and calm the mind to the point where conceptual thought stops altogether. I would see this as a pleasant bonus rather than a final goal. More useful is to aspire and practise to see thought as transparent, insubstantial. In this way, when thought is there – whether deliberate or not – there is no sense of cluttering or entangling within the heart and mind. Its presence is just like a fragrance or a physical feeling, a visual image or a sound – it embellishes the silence and stillness of the mind, rather than occluding or corrupting it.

Q: What if important things come to mind while I'm meditating? Can I keep a pen and paper handy and write them down?

A: If you are trying to calm and focus the mind, even if spectacularly significant or inspired thoughts arise, the most skilful response is to say to them, internally, "Later...". Alan Ginsberg tells a great story about being forbidden to write poetry during a retreat. He almost exploded with the effort of restraint, but then, when he was free to write at the end of the event, he was astonished to find that what he had then written was far more insightful and potent than what had come up during his meditations, and that he was sure would be lost and wasted forever.

It might be, however, that you have some particularly important project to develop, or perhaps a paper that you have to write for a class, and you wish to delve deeply into yourself for ideas and inspiration on those themes.

If that is the case then, indeed, get out your notebook or unfold a legal pad, lay a pen on top with its cap off and close your eyes. Once the mind is reasonably settled, ask yourself a question relating to the theme – then, as and when something comes to mind, jot it down, refocus the attention, then ask another question.

This can be a very rich, reflective process. I use this method a few times every year, for various events and projects. It can also be a way in which we do some of our best thinking.

Q: Why does meditation have to be in the lotus posture?

A: Once the body is trained to sit in the lotus posture, it's the most comfortable position to sit in. The body is very well balanced, and it supports the flow of energy in the body. It helps the mind to be as bright as possible. It's the most stable and comfortable position for the body.

It takes a long time to get used to sitting in the lotus posture comfortably but once the joints are loosened up, it's the most balanced, energetic, and relaxed posture possible.



LESSON TWO

MOVEMENT AND STILLNESS

In Buddhist meditation practice we are developing natural qualities that already exist within us as potentials. We are not trying to acquire anything special from outside, or trying to change ourselves into someone else in a forced or unnatural way.

Like all living things, human beings require both stability or steadiness and flexibility or adaptability; it's necessary to have both of these qualities. If a tree or a plant were absolutely rigid, as soon as a breeze came along or something knocked against it, it would break. Conversely, if a plant has no strength in it, if it's completely flexible, it will just droop, and not remain upright at all.

The basic theme for this lesson, movement and stillness, is about looking at these different elements of our being and seeing how they work together, looking at both that which is stable and steady and that which is flexible and adaptable.

Stillness, Silence, Space

A common misconception about meditation is that one is aiming for absolute stillness: stillness, silence, space. With that idea, one can feel burdened by agitation, noise and constriction – no stillness, no silence, no space – and this can lead one to long for these qualities that are missing. This is a misunderstanding of the goal of meditation. The whole thrust of Buddhism on the West Coast in the late 50's and 60's was to make emptiness the big thing, and this became a theme for the counter-culture. By worshipping that kind of stillness, silence or emptiness, but mistaking absence and stasis for it, one can miss out on a large part of life, particularly the life of the thinking mind.

The Chattering Mind

The thinking mind will come up in most, if not all, of these meditation lessons; this is the chattering mind, the collection of commentators in the mind giving their opinions about everything. And it's not as though there is just one commentary going, there's a whole committee... and not all the members agree with each other!

Working with the chattering mind, which endlessly reviews the past and plans for the future and has opinions about everything else, can feel very burdensome. One wants the chattering mind to shut up, and it is easy to feel bliss when it does stop. However, if not thinking was equivalent to enlightenment, the Buddha would have prescribed an ancient form of Thorazine to wipe out the thinking process, and we'd all be happy. It doesn't

work that way. True happiness is not just a matter of not thinking. Ajahn Chah often said: “Water buffaloes [which are common in Thailand] are the epitome of the extremely quiet mind!” Water buffaloes have an aura of incredible density. They can hang around in rice paddies and chew their cud for hours on end. Similarly, a chicken can sit on its nest for days. So, by just sitting in meditation and not thinking for days and days, one might develop as much wisdom as a chicken, which is probably not a great deal. So, it’s good to acknowledge a sense of relief that one can get from the stillness, the silence, and the peace, but it’s a mistake to overestimate their importance.

Movement and Stillness on a Practical Level

On a practical level, the question may arise when sitting in meditation: When is it necessary to sit still and when is it appropriate to move when the body gets sore? Also, different forms of meditation involve movement, particularly walking meditation. This will be addressed in a later chapter. What we’re focusing on in this chapter is movement and stillness at a more subtle level.

Working with Movement and Stillness

It is important to understand how movement and stillness blend with each other. Skilful meditation involves respecting both of these elements.

Mindfulness of Breathing

First, one must understand what is known as “mindfulness of breathing.” This is the simple technique of bringing the attention to the natural flow of the breath, as described in Lesson One. It doesn’t involve trying to breathe in any special fashion, to breathe deeply or slowly or quickly, or to manipulate the breath in any way. As the body breathes naturally, one uses the rhythm of the breath as a focal point for attention. The breath is used principally to help train the mind, to train the attention to remain in the present moment, because the breath and the body only exist in the present moment. The mind can create an imaginary future or fabricate the past, it can become preoccupied with vivid memories. But the body does not follow along. The body is always sitting here, in the present, while the mind is involved in thoughts of the past and of the future. And the body is still here when the mind comes back into the present moment.

The body and the body’s functions – like the breath – are a natural, easy, and reliable way of keying in to the present moment. The more one can keep the attention with the present, then the more the heart can be trained not to create problems, not to get lost in anxieties, fears, or obsessions, or in the ten thousand distractions the mind can create.

The practice of mindfulness of breathing brings the attention to the natural flow of the breath. Focusing on

the simple aggregation of feelings and sensations of the breath is similar to focusing on the centre of a mandala or the centre of a beautiful rose. The eye naturally goes to the centre – the heart of the rose. With the mindfulness of breathing practice, the breath is similar to the very heart of the mandala, of the flower. With the attention resting on that particular spot, other experiences or perceptions, such as sounds in the street, feelings in the body, stray thoughts, etc., remain around the periphery. Keep bringing the attention to the breath, the centre, the balancing point. That is the axis of the attention.

Bringing attention to the breath is a very good way of getting a sense of the relationship between movement and stillness, and is one way of working with or looking at that relationship. One brings attention to the breath and becomes aware of how it moves in and out of the body. One then begins to notice that there is a pause after the out-breath, for a few seconds, before the in-breath begins. At the end of the in-breath, there is another pause. And then the breath turns.

At first, the attention is on the movement of the breath. As that develops, one also begins to keep the attention steady when the breath reaches the end of its cycle. At the end of the in-breath, one keeps the attention on the breath, even though the breath is not moving. The attention stays with the still point at the end of the in-breath. Then the attention follows the breath as it moves again, with the out-breath. Then again, the attention stays with the still point at the end of the out-breath.

The Wandering Mind

It's important to keep in mind that the still point between the in-breath and the out-breath, and between the out-breath and the next in-breath, is a point where the wandering mind can be activated very easily. When I was in the early years of my spiritual search, I walked into a forest monastery in northeast Thailand never having meditated before. After being instructed in mindfulness of breathing, I found that my mind was eager to wander, to go off and play in various places. Even though I could keep my attention on the breath for brief periods by sheer will-power, I would get to the end of the inhalation and then my mind would take a quick trip to India and back, before the next cycle of breathing began. At the end of the out-breath, I found the pause was a little bit longer so I could get all the way to Europe and back home to the breath again before the next cycle started.

Sustaining Attention and Experiencing Stillness of Mind

As one trains the mind in sustaining attention, one will find that, as the breath reaches the end of its cycle, the attention can stay with the quality of stillness. These are the moments when one starts to experience the natural stillness of the mind. This stillness is like the space in a room. When a room is empty of people, the emptiness or space in the room can be obvious. If there is a crowd of people, we generally don't notice the space. We notice

each other, our friends, the furniture, etc. – the attention goes to the objects in the room.

Similarly, when following the breath, the attention will stay with the breath, with that complex of feelings, using that as its object. One doesn't notice the space within which the breath is moving. At the ends of the in-breath and the out-breath, the point at which the breath stops, when it reaches the turning points, one can notice the stillness of the mind for those few seconds, the space through which the breath is moving. The breath reaches its end, and there's stillness. Then the movement begins again.

At the moments of stillness, there is a great peacefulness, just as when the wind blows through the trees, rustling all the leaves – it makes a noise, then it subsides and there is quiet. This peacefulness is also like the silence when a refrigerator turns off. You didn't notice the noise of the refrigerator until it switches off. Suddenly, you notice the quiet and may even notice that you were subconsciously irritated until it switched off. Similarly, reaching the end of the breath, noticing the stillness of the mind, brings a gentle feeling of release.

Stillness and Movement

In the beginning, one notices movement and stillness in direct contrast to each other, like noticing the people in the room, and then the space in the room. Then, as the meditation deepens and the attention is trained to stay with the breath, one finds that the mind does not rush

off to a distraction and can just stay with the still quality. As the mind is trained to stay with the spaces between the inhalation and exhalation and with the stillness of the mind, one begins to notice that the stillness in the mind is not completely obstructed or occluded by the movement of the breath. One begins to notice the space around the breath and the quality of stillness in the mind – which is always there – underlying the movement of the breath. As physicists tell us, atoms are mostly space, our bodies are mostly space, empty space constitutes the largest proportion of any object.

There is the movement of the breath, the movement of changing perceptions. Simultaneously, there is stillness within and around the movement, in the same way a tree has the qualities of flexibility and firmness, existing together. There is both stillness of mind and heart, and movement, and they don't obstruct each other. Over time, one develops more steady and keen attention. One doesn't try to find stillness or peace by making everything stop, or by zoning out or getting away. One learns to find peace not only when the refrigerator stops or the breath ends, but by being able to tap into that fundamental spaciousness and peace, even while there is activity – even thought – going on.

Beginning with Sound and Moving to Thought

At first, it is easier to find the stillness and peace by using an external sound, like the rustling of the leaves. It's

more difficult with thinking, because thought is so full of interesting content – interesting in good, bad, painful, frightening, and exciting ways. The attention is drawn into the stories created by thought. But as the meditation develops, one is able to listen to thoughts without being drawn into them. One can listen to the internal committee and let all these voices meet in the space, in the crucible of the heart.

Allowing the World to Be

The final aspect of the blending of movement and stillness involves looking at that which is the most stable, at its most refined level – to look beyond the concept of stillness as merely external quietude or even the absence of thought. This supremely stable element is the quality of one's own awareness or knowing – wisdom. All of these concepts are used in the Buddhist tradition.

This means that one simply allows the experience of reality to take shape in whatever way it happens, whether the feelings that arise are pleasant or painful, whether the thoughts are beautiful or ugly. Rather than trying to find any kind of still or stable element within that which is arising, one finds that the stillness, or stability, is in training the heart to rest in the quality of awareness. These three levels cover every aspect of this spaciousness: the space between objects, the space within objects, and the spaciousness of awareness itself.

Ajahn Chah and Still, Flowing Water

My teacher, Ajahn Chah, had a habit of using a particular theme for a few months at a time, taking a particular question or conundrum and using it with whoever came to visit or whomever he was teaching. The last theme he used before he had a stroke and was no longer able to speak, in 1981, was: “Do you know what still water is? Have you ever seen still water?” The visitors or students generally answered that they knew what still water was. Then Ajahn Chah would ask: “Do you know what flowing water is like? Did you ever see flowing water?” And those there would answer that they did. Finally Ajahn Chah would ask, “Did you ever see still, flowing water?” The answer was always that they had never seen still, flowing water.

Ajahn Chah would then instruct them that the mind is essentially like still, flowing water. What we perceive, what we think, what we feel – our moods, our emotions – flow and change. It’s their intrinsic nature to arise, take shape, change and disappear. That is their character, that’s what they’re supposed to do. This flow of perception and feeling is what is called the conditioned mind. But that which knows, that which is aware of the perceptions and moods and thoughts, is perfectly still. It is like a mirror, reflecting beautiful, ugly, pleasant, or painful. The mirror does not get excited by the beautiful, threatened by the violent, or disgusted by the ugly. It impartially reflects whatever image is presented to it.

Being the Knowing Heart

Similarly, according to Buddhist understanding, the quality of awareness or of knowing, the quality of wisdom, utterly fills the heart. It is like a place of stability, or, in Buddhist terminology, a place of refuge. With meditation, particularly with vipassanā practice, which is part of the guided meditation below, the meditator progresses through the different levels to establish that solid basis of knowing in the heart. One is training the heart to rest in that quality of wisdom so that one can listen to the inner committee – the internal dialogue of feelings, thoughts, perceptions – or to the external committee – the people outside – and develop the ability to watch it all arise, abide, and then fade away. One cultivates the heart that is embracing it all and remains unconfused by it.

It may seem that this would have all the emotional appeal of turning oneself into a video camera, that one becomes simply a data reception unit, registering sights and thoughts and feelings and not becoming involved with them. This might sound like dissociation from the world in a cold, clinical way. But rather, by doing this, one is simply eliminating one's confusion. One is attuning the heart to the reality of the way things are – and that is the richest and most beautiful of experiences.

When we establish the heart in this unattached, non-possessive quality of knowing or wisdom, then our actions and our attitudes are guided by this wisdom and by loving-kindness, not by reactivity or greed or fear, not by our judgements or self-centredness. When we see a way

to help someone, instantly we help. When we need to be strong, we're strong. When we need to yield, we can yield. When it's necessary to just shut up and do nothing, we shut up. When nothing can be done in a certain situation, we leave matters alone without feeling like we should be doing something. We experience a complete detachment that is wedded to complete , so that what guides our actions is sensitivity to time and place. We are not guided by habit or opinion or the dictates of what people around us expect.

These simple elements of movement and stillness chart the transition from the ordinary sensory experiences of hearing, feeling, thinking, and acting, to establishing the basis of awareness and knowing. The point of meditation is not just to be able to sit still for a long period of time, unconcerned with sore knees, or to make the breath sacred, even though the breath is central and significant to our lives. The point is to live as a harmonious human being, as a blessing for oneself and others, to make one's life as meaningful as possible.



GUIDED MEDITATION

TWO

Opening the Meditation

Begin to settle into your posture, and close your eyes gently. Bring the attention into the spine. Feel how you're holding the body.

In the beginning, don't try to do anything special. Just let the body sit as it will and notice for a moment how you are holding your body.

The Body

Perceive the body within the space of your own awareness. In the field or space of knowing, of awareness, the cluster of perceptions here in the middle is called the body. Feel the spine in particular. As you hold the body in that awareness, let the spine grow upward; let it stretch, reach skywards. Try not to be tense or rigid. Just let the body grow firm and upright, like the stem of a flower reaching towards the sun.

Notice as movement and stillness become apparent. Notice the mental qualities of firmness and relaxation, see how these support your sense of resolution and your sense of adaptability. It's also very helpful to establish these same

qualities within the body. Notice how the upright spine – sitting in a dignified way – helps to bring alertness and energy to the body. Hold the spine as a central column, and let the whole body relax around the spine... like a gentle warm light flowing down through the whole body, softening all the points of tension and tightness in the face... the stomach... the shoulders... throughout the whole physical being... the pelvis... the legs.

Notice as the body relaxes and softens around the spine – it is like a length of beautiful soft cloth draped over the central column... easy, free of tension, gentle. Take a few minutes just to establish the body in this harmony of energy and relaxation. Find the point of balance in how you sit, the way the body holds itself.

Now feel the presence of the body in the space of your own awareness, let this cluster of feelings be at the very centre. Without pushing away the noises of the street, noises in the room, anything outside of the experience of the body, leave them around the edges of the awareness, beyond the outer petals of this mandala. Just take the feelings of the body at the centre and then slowly narrow the attention down, from the body as a whole, to the rhythm of the breathing, just the feeling of the breath. It doesn't matter how the body happens to breathe: long or short, deep or shallow, doesn't matter. Just let the breath happen on its own. Let that cluster of feelings be at the very centre of this mandala of the attention. Let the mind – the attention – rest upon that gentle flow.

When you get caught up in something – the attention is carried away, distracted by a thought or a memory – as soon

as you notice that distraction has happened, consciously let go. Release the mind's grip on whatever it is. It's as if you've wandered out to the edges of the mandala. Let go of whatever has spun you out there. Come back to the centre again, back to the feeling of the breath. Stabilize the attention; steady it with the breath.

Find your own way. Perhaps just attuning to the breath to begin with is your real task. Just notice where you are. Work with the breath as you find it. If the mind is very busy, work with that. Just try to establish some connection to the breath. If the mind is calm and the attention is steady, you can be a bit more refined. One is not better than the other; it's just the material you have to work with at the moment.

Stillness in the Breath

When you find your focus is steadier, follow the breath closely. Begin to pay particular attention to the end of the out-breath and then the end of the in-breath. Notice those turning points, the moments where the breath pauses. Don't try to extend them unnaturally... just notice. Let the mind attend, tasting the quality of stillness, the pause as the breath turns. See if you can feel, even just for a moment, that you are touching upon that quality of inner stillness... that pause... touching that innate stillness of the space of the mind.

It doesn't matter how many times the mind gets carried away. Its attention is infinitely renewable. When you notice that you've become distracted, release whatever the mind has clung onto. Return to the centre – back to the breath again – gently, patiently. You cling; you let go; you begin again.

Noticing Space in the Breath

If you find the mind is steady, relax the focus on the breath. Imagine the breath is like a horizontal bar of light in the vast space of the mind, with the completion of the inhalation at one end of the bar and the completion of the exhalation at the other... Your attention is like a cursor moving gently to and fro along the bar of light. Notice the space around the breath, the space within it... before it... after it... permeating it, just like a beam of light in space. It has a form, a shape, a colour, a tone, but it's not solid. There's space around it, within it, before and after it.

Relaxing the focus on the breath, see if you can catch a sense of the innate stillness or spaciousness within which the breath is moving. Then extend your attention to apprehend that quality of stillness. See that it's not only present when the breath stops at the end of each cycle, but is like the space in the room. That space is always here, whether or not there are people in the room. There's the movement of the breath, but also the space and the stillness, which are the environment it exists in.

Resting in Knowing Awareness

If the mind is settled enough – stable enough – see if you can let the heart simply rest in this quality of knowing. You can even let go of the breath as a particular object. Just establish this open, receptive, embracing awareness. Notice sounds or physical sensations, the breath, the thoughts, everything arising within the space of knowing, coming into

consciousness, appearing, changing, dissolving. The external, objective quality of space is mirrored by the internal or subjective quality of knowing. The heart is open to all things, receiving all things, letting go of all things.

If the mind is very busy, wandering here and there, and latching onto this and that, frustrating attempts at spacious concentration, this means the currents are pulling, the wind is blowing and you need to drop the anchor down. So keep the attention focused on the breath; stabilize the attention in that way.

The more easily the mind, the attention, stays rooted in the present moment, the more easily you can open to this quality of pure knowing, this openhearted awareness, just receiving everything... knowing everything. All sounds... thoughts... physical sensations... letting them all in... knowing them... letting them all go. As if the heart is breathing them all in, is vitalized by the act of knowing, and then breathes them all out again.

End of Meditation



QUESTION AND ANSWER

TWO

Q: When you're meditating and you're following your breath, having it as a focal point, and you know there will be extraneous noise outside, such as a dog barking, how do you maintain your focus? Do you tell yourself that you may be interrupted while you're sitting? What do you suggest in case something startles you?

A: It depends. External things you handle in one way, and internal things you handle a little differently. The image of having the breath at the centre helps when it's something external. For those whose minds work in a visual way, keeping the feeling of the breath at the centre helps if you hear the traffic noise or a dog barking – you just imagine the noise out on the periphery of the awareness, out on the edges. You notice it, but you consciously turn your attention away from it. If you start a war with it, then it's a problem.

Ajahn Chah came to England in the 1970's. It was a big thing – the Great Master coming from the Far East to visit a Buddhist group in London. They had a very small place and a lot of people squished inside. It was one of those very rare hot summer nights in England, and the room was steaming. They started the meditation session,

and everyone was hot, so they opened the window. But there was a noisy pub playing loud rock music across the street. After a few minutes of the music, they closed the windows again. Ajahn Chah just sat there the whole time. With the windows closed, everyone started heating up again. They're about to asphyxiate, and Ajahn Chah is still sitting there. They open the windows, and there's the rock music and so on and so on. He let them sit there for an hour-and-a-half. Finally, he rang the bell. Because this was England, everyone started apologizing immediately. They had even been across the road to the pub to try to get them to turn the music down, but it didn't work. The first thing Ajahn Chah said was, "You think that the sound is annoying you, but actually it's you that is annoying the sound. The sound is just what it is; it's just the air vibrating. It's up to us whether we start an argument with it."

So, that was really good advice. The dog might be barking, or there may be traffic noise, but it's really up to us whether we contend against it or resent it. We might have been playing the same music ourselves yesterday. Suddenly, the next-door neighbor is playing it, and we think, "Don't make noise! I'm trying to meditate! How insensitive!" The point is to have the attitude of not starting a fight with it, to be okay with the noise. Just consciously let the noise be off to the side. You notice it and then consciously let it go. You can use your imagination in different ways, like imagining that: "The dog is just being a dog, it's not trying to annoy me. It's just doing its dog thing; that's what dogs do. They're supposed to. If I were a dog, I'd bark." So, you work with the attitude

in very simple, straightforward ways and let the mind come back to the centre.

If you're working with something internal, like an obsessive thought or an idea or a memory, there are different ways you can work with it. For example, before you sit down, make a resolution that for the period of meditation, whatever might come into the mind – whether it's a great line for a poem, a phone call you forgot to make, etc. – can be taken care of later. Right now, for these few minutes, you're going to make this simple practice the most important thing in the world. After this meditation time, everything else can be taken care of. Whatever comes up may be important and will get taken care of... but not now.

You set that up as an attitude in the beginning, so that when things pop up and demand our attention – such as something you have to worry about or plan for, something you have to rehash or figure out, something you have to compose – as these distractions come up, very gently and clearly say, “Later.” It's amazing how powerful a simple thing like that is. If you think, “Shut up! Go away!” you're trying to suppress the thought as an act of will. It's the same as trying to suppress the noise – you're fighting with it. You can suppress it with your will for a short while, but the very act of pushing it away gives it energy so that as soon as your grip loosens, it comes back. So just gently and firmly say, “Later. I'm not saying you're not important; this is a very significant thought, a deeply important anxiety that I need to be worried about, but not right now.” You respect it. You say, “Yes, you have

every right to say your piece and I'm not ignoring you, but not now."

Setting the attitude in that way helps enormously, because when we work with the mind, it's important to recognize that the means *is* the end. If you work with the mind using aggressive, assertive or wilful means, the result will be that you are tense, agitated, or conflicted. Alternatively, if you work in a gentle, clear, loving manner, the end will be derived from that attitude: you will be harmonious, simple, and clear. The philosophy of the end justifying the means is completely non-Buddhist. In Buddhism, the means *is* the end. The means and the end are twins.

So, as the distracting thought comes up, if it doesn't retreat but really demands the attention, if it comes back over and over, just say to it, "Okay, speak up!" Don't try to keep pushing it away. As they say in the construction business, "If you can't hide it, make a feature of it." So there it is. It's demanding to be thought about; it's not going to go away. It's really grabbing the attention. Bring it in, invite it to speak up. Find out what it's about, where it's coming from, what's driving it. We'll go into this more in the next lesson when we discuss using conceptual thought as a means of meditation, for what you find is that you can use a whole range of intellectual and intuitive abilities to investigate what is driving a particular thought, a fear, obsession, or a mood. You can work with it.

Using thought in this way is completely different from letting the chattering mind run riot. It has a measured evenness to it. Rather than the mind being like four radios

playing different stations, you listen to one radio playing something that is worth hearing. Even though thoughts are arising, they occur within a meditative space.

Often it seems, when one reads or hears about meditation, that the goal is an absence of thoughts. But that's not always the case. From the point of view of Buddhist psychology, there are six senses. The eye perceives forms, the ear perceives sound, the tongue perceives taste, the nose perceives odours, the body perceives touch, and the mind or the brain perceives thought. The sixth sense is the mental faculty, the knowing of thoughts and moods. It's just like the other senses. If we can see and hear with perfect peace of mind, or we can perceive the breath arising, changing, and subsiding with complete peace, then just because we're thinking doesn't mean the mind can't also be completely at peace at the same time.

We can use investigative thought to help clarify what is driving the particular feeling or causing it to arise. In this way, there can be thinking going on, but the mind is focused and peaceful at the same time. There may be a hot issue, a big event that has happened, and the memory of it is there. We find we can just let the mind continue ranting on about it, but at the same time we can be at peace with the ranting, just as we can be at peace with a loud noise outside in the street. We can say, "That's just a noise. If I don't go and argue with the noise, there's no problem. It's fine. It's just another facet of nature coming and going and changing."

I've done this many times; the mind is ranting on about something but instead of getting drawn into the content of the thoughts, I reflect: "Look at that one go! Boy, I'm really stirred up tonight! Listen to that one!" The mind goes on and on, but the thinking is embraced in a quality of peacefulness. There is a fusion of movement and stillness. The mind is moving, but we don't argue with it. We attend to it, but we're not caught up in the agitation.

Q: Could you talk about the body and movement – particularly the question of when to move to relieve discomfort in sitting meditation?

A: Movement is a major part of meditation practice. When I first walked into a monastery in Thailand, I had never meditated before. We would sit on a thin grass mat on a concrete floor. Each sitting was an hour long, and you weren't supposed to move. So, my immediate introduction to meditation after the first 15 minutes was pain.

But it's important to realize that Buddhist meditation isn't a masochistic enterprise, even though it sometimes ends up that way. We don't seek physical pain – it's a side effect rather than the purpose. We would all be quite happy without it. But there are a couple of issues we need to deal with in terms of physical pain.

First, how we learn to deal with physical pain in a skilful way translates directly into how we deal with emotional pain. Physical pain is a very simple monosyllabic language: "Ouch." "This hurts." "Don't want." "Get away." "Stop." "Ah, that's better." On the other hand, our

reaction to emotional pain is convoluted and distracting. So it's very useful to learn how to work with physical discomfort with a balance of movement and stillness. Approaching pain with attitudes like, "I vowed I'm not going to move," "Everyone's watching," "It's wrong to move – I should force my way through it," is a direct route to the osteopath, if not the emergency room. You can't just force yourself with will power – the body won't comply. You can override pain for a while, but you feel pain because the body is being stressed to some degree. It's a warning sign. If you're rigid or stiff, you break. If, at the other extreme, you're completely limp and, as soon as you feel a slight bit of discomfort, you start fidgeting, then you will never experience any really deep peace, because you've developed a blind reactivity towards pain. If you move as soon as you experience discomfort, you make yourself vulnerable and weak.

What Buddhism calls the Middle Way is a balance between these extremes. This balance is not a matter of deciding to move half the time and remain still half the time; it's something different. The Middle Way is like the point from which the two extremes pivot, not just being halfway between the two, or going 50/50. It's the source of the two extremes. It is achieved by finding the right attitude towards discomfort.

When we feel physical pain, our first instinct is to tense up against it, to resist it, be frightened of it or annoyed with it. This feels like a reasonable hatred; it seems totally valid to dislike the pain just because it's not pleasure. Just as in the example above about the noise in the street during

Ajahn Chah's meditation session, it seems reasonable to think that the noise is annoying me. The pain in the knee seems annoying, but as Ajahn Chah pointed out, it's really you annoying the pain. The mind grabs hold of the pain and starts a fight with it. With meditation, you start to let go of the reactivity, of the thought that the pain is bad, that it shouldn't be there, you don't want it, and you begin to ask what is really going on.

As we discussed earlier, pain is exactly like sound: if you can't hide it, then make a feature of it. If pain in the back, the leg, the arm, or wherever it is grabs your attention, don't look at it as an irritation, distracting you from the breath. Let go of the breath and give the pain centre stage. Explore the pain. You will begin to notice that the feeling is unpleasant just as a sound might be irritating. Don't try to make it pleasant or block it out. Simply recognize it as an unpleasant feeling. You'll start to see that the feeling is one thing, and what the mind adds to it is another. Even if the mind buys into the resistance, you can catch it and see that happening. You can recognize the pain as just a feeling and begin to see the distance between the discomfort and real physical damage. You will find that you can learn to be with that uncomfortable feeling, not by being tough and resisting it through strength alone, but by being able to simply know that it is an unpleasant feeling. You don't have to hate it, fight it, or worry about it. If you need to, you can move, but you can stay with it as long as it's bearable, seeing that it's not that bad.

The main point is to adjust your attitude towards it. Establish an attitude of determination *not* to start a war

with your own body. From that perspective, you will find that the discomfort can be present, but that you can be quite at peace with it. If you find yourself looking at the discomfort as an annoying intruder ruining your meditation, bring in an attitude of kindness – loving-kindness – towards the pain, towards the feeling that is not likeable. To employ loving-kindness doesn't mean we try to *like* the pain. We simply recognize and accept the presence of the pain in the leg, or the headache. You can't will it away, but softening the attitude towards it is the first step.

The second step is that in bringing the pain into the centre of attention, you begin to notice that you've become tense by resisting the discomfort. You can then relax the body like relaxing into a yoga pose. When doing yoga, you might try to get the pose right, and you can be rigid in that effort. But then you learn to relax into it and suddenly an extra couple of inches manifest from somewhere, enabling you to move fully into the pose. Working with pain in meditation is exactly the same. You see how you tense up against it, and then you relax into it. You see how the joints in the hips, in the knees – all the way through – are tight. Physically relaxing the system actually reduces the tension that you create through resistance to the pain. As the tension drops, the cause of the pain is substantially removed. The degree of pain goes down, and the fact that you're not fighting with it means that even though there's discomfort, it's not a problem.

When you work with pain in this more genuine and direct way, you will develop a much more accurate

intuitive sense of your own body. Then, when you know your body is really being stressed, that you've pushed yourself too hard, you know that it's time to move. When you move, it's not an act of aversion to the pain, it's an act of kindness towards the body. This is a major difference.

Ajahn Chah would say, "Always wait for a few minutes. When you really want to move, just wait. For another minute or two, just wait. Just relax a bit. Be patient." For this kind of waiting to be most useful, you have to wait until the motivation to move is not out of aversion to the pain, but out of kindness to the body. You need to be careful, though, because your "inner lawyer" will try to convince you that you're being kind, just to get you to move at any cost. But you need to examine whether you're really being kind or whether you're moving out of fear or avoidance. The blessing of waiting, of being patient, is that when you move, there's a physical release and relief in the heart as well. If you move out of fear and avoidance of the pain, then when there's another twitch, you will go right back to the fear/aversion tangle again.

Working with chronic pain that has nothing to do with the posture of the body is exactly the same. Let yourself fully accept it in your heart. It makes a huge difference.

Working with physical pain this way is useful, because you start to relate to emotional pain in the same way. You can be with grief or anger or sadness or fear and abide with them – accepting them, knowing them, and letting go of them – in exactly the same way.

Q: Please talk about sleepiness.

A: When we first sit and meditate, we can find two main drifts: agitation in one direction and dullness in the other. The Buddha spoke a language called Pali that is related to Sanskrit. The Pali words for agitation and dullness become familiar to the Buddhist meditator. In Pali, restlessness is *uddhacca-kukkucca* (oo-dhacha koo-koo-cha), which is wonderfully onomatopoeic! Saying it makes you feel like you have sand under your skin. Dullness is called *thīna-middha* (thee-na mee-dha), or sloth and torpor. These were addressed a bit in the first lesson in talking about the ways the mind tends to drift. When we think of relaxing, we tend to think of it as conking out. When we think of alertness, we tend to feel it means being excited or frightened.

In meditation, we're trying to discover the dimension of our being that is simultaneously both completely relaxed and completely awake. You might not think that you were born with this capacity, but the fundamental nature of our minds possesses that combination of qualities. The mind's true nature is both perfectly awake and perfectly peaceful.

At first, the mind tends to mishandle relaxation and, when we do this practice, we notice the drift towards dullness. However, dullness works like sleep; it happens in cycles. If the mind has a tendency towards dullness, as soon as you relax, out goes the light. Thus you need to catch the first wave of slipping into sleep. If you start feeling dull, you can sit with your eyes open. Another technique is to hold something like a matchstick in your

hands, between your thumbs, off your palms so it's up in the air; as soon as the mind starts to drift in the first wave of dullness, whatever you are holding will drop. The hands are very sensitive, so as soon as that happens you will notice it, and that will signal you to wake up.

Another technique for dealing with sleepiness is to keep an acute consciousness of the spine; when we get dull, the back starts to bend and the head starts to droop. Using the techniques of holding something between the thumbs, or keeping this heightened consciousness of the spine, will help you make the effort to be alert and not let that first wave of sleepiness sink in. If you can make it through that first wave, you find you can pull out of it and prevent the whole process from getting underway. If you don't catch it, the sleep cycle can take you into la-la land for 20 minutes or longer.

If you're really desperate, put something like a book or a box of matches on your head. This is very popular among monastics with a sleepiness problem. If you sit with other people, you also have the embarrassment factor if the book drops. If it's just a matchstick between your thumbs, nobody knows. But if there's a box of matches or a book on your head, as soon as you start to drift, off it falls and, if it's loud, everyone knows. This is called offsetting one defilement against another. You play your pride off against your sleepiness. You use your bad habits for your own benefit. But this is not a guarantee against sleepiness, because really experienced meditators can develop a technique of bending back and forth with

something like a matchbox on the head and get practically all the way down to the floor without letting it drop off!

Using a candle flame, or any kind of visual form, as a meditation object is good, too. As soon as the first wave of sleepiness comes in, the eyes can't keep a focus. By endeavouring to keep the edges of the flame sharp in the vision, you'll know as soon as you drift. When you get sleepy the visual images will begin to drift apart, so when you see two candle flames instead of one you know: "Brighten up!"



LESSON THREE

KNOWING VERSUS THINKING

In the first two lessons, we examined the qualities of focus and concentration in meditation: how to bring the mind to a single point, to train the mind to be able to attend to the present moment. However, focus and concentration by themselves are not particularly liberating qualities. Being focused or concentrated can be very peaceful and pleasant, but through them alone one does not develop the type of understanding that is the goal of insight meditation.

Concentration and Insight

The Buddha distinguished between two levels, or layers, of meditation practice. In the first, which was covered in Lessons One and Two, one lays a foundation of calmness, tranquility and focus. The second level, which is liberating for the heart in the deepest way, is the development of wisdom or an actual understanding of the way things are

– what we truly are, how we exist and how we fit into the universe.

Sometimes the two levels of meditation are presented as distinct or separate from each other, with each level having its own techniques. However, Ajahn Sumedho, an American monk and the head of the Thai forest lineage of Ajahn Chah in the West, and Ajahn Chah himself have both stressed that it is more accurate to see these levels as being part of a natural continuum rather than seeing them as unrelated, distinct qualities. It is more accurate to describe them as a single, fundamental actuality with different phases or attributes, like the blossom on an apple tree and a bite of the fully ripe apple. They appear different from each other, just as the flower is not the same as the apple, but in a way they are elements of the same process.

Developing Insight

Insight is developed on a basis of calmness, because only when the mind is calm and steady can one begin to let go of the particular meditation object that has been used as an anchor and attend to the fabric of experience in the present moment. Lesson Two discussed letting go of the breath and stepping back and witnessing the space in which the breath moves, experiencing that spaciousness. By developing the meditation in this way, its steadiness becomes firmly established, i.e., the boat is steady in the water. Then one can let go of the meditation object and start to employ the natural faculties of wisdom

or knowing. One lets go more and more deeply of the *content* of experience and learns to witness the *process* of experience.

How it Works

This is how it works: the meditation starts with focusing on the breath or on a particular object. Once the mind is clearly established and firmly placed in the present moment, one lets go of focusing on the breath, or the other meditation object, and opens the heart to the whole flow of experience. This flow might include hearing sounds of birds chirping, or feeling a sensation in the legs, or having a sudden memory, or remembering something that's in the refrigerator to have for a snack after the meditation. There are lots of different stray thoughts, ideas or feelings through which the mind can wander. But with the development of insight meditation, rather than focusing on the content, whatever it might be, one focuses instead at the whole process of experience. Rather than trying to figure out what kind of bird made the sound, one notices sound arising and passing away, or one notices a thought arising and passing away or a sensation in the body, such as a feeling in the leg, arising and passing away.

The idea is to look at the quality of the changing nature of experience and to deliberately turn the attention away from the content, even if the mind is greatly interested in the subject, such as what to have for a snack later. During the meditation period, one doesn't pay any attention to the content of one's thoughts. For example, there is no

interest in what one's grandmother is doing but just in the fact that a thought or memory of one's grandmother arises, abides and fades away. One uses the model of letting go from Lesson Two to release the mind's involvement in the stories it tells, to stand back and watch the waves of events, the patterns of experience coming and going and changing.

Steadying the Awareness

As was described in Lesson Two, one begins to find that the quality of knowing, of awareness, holds steady. The awareness becomes clear and spacious. One begins to witness the flow of events and patterns of thought and feeling, both in the world inside and the world outside. Everything happens within the same spacious arena.

The True Nature of Experience

By letting go of the content of the experience and training the mind and heart to rest in the spacious, accepting knowing, one begins to notice that the content isn't all that interesting. When the heart is firmly established in the quality of knowing, it is immaterial whether what comes into that arena is attractive or painful, interesting or boring, or whether the same thought has arisen a thousand times already. One can rest in this spacious and knowing quality and feel the process of experience. One begins to understand that the nature of experience is to change, while one begins to see the fundamentally selfless quality of experience as well.

For example: the thought of an experience unique to one's life or a very personal memory arises. Then the sound of a bird or a car driving past arises. One can notice that the memory seems to belong only to oneself, to be an integral part of one's identity, part of "me." But the sound of the car going past does not feel like "me." It seems external to oneself.

However, when one is firmly established in this spacious quality of awareness, one realizes that the personal memory and the sound of the car both arise and pass away; they both happen in the same space. One has the insight that the labels one puts on experience, such as "me" or "not me" or "outside of me," are just labels tacked onto the experience and not the experience itself. Stepping back far enough from the content of the experience allows one to realize that all experience arises and passes away; the personal thought, the deep emotion, the random noise, all arise and pass away. They are all patterns of nature welling into being and subsiding.

The Impersonal Nature of Experience

With this insight comes the intuitive wisdom of the heart that recognizes these phenomena are all just patterns of nature. Before the realization happens, one is inclined to label some phenomena as "me," some phenomena as "not me" or "the world," and for some phenomena we are unsure whether they are internal or external or just what they are. But with the development of insight, this wisdom of the heart, one begins to realize that all phenomena that arise and pass away are just patterns of nature.

With this realization, one is able to begin letting go of taking things so personally. For example, one can remember a wonderful, blissful experience, or a great achievement, or a moment when one was truly loved. These seem like moments when we got it right, perfect moments. And one can remember a terrible, shattering experience where it all went wrong, such as the breakup of a relationship or a failure. These were moments of terrible pain. Then one can remember something thoroughly mundane, like the sound of a car going past. One begins to see that whether something is experienced as inside oneself or outside of oneself or as “the world,” the mind and heart can awaken to the fact that calling it “self” or “other,” “inside” or “outside,” is just a conventional designation. It is really just the patterns of nature coming into being, unfolding, and fading away, and it is all held within a unifying quality of knowing, awareness.

What is being discussed here is not a doctrinal, dogmatic truth that one is supposed to believe in. Meditation in Buddhism is a process of investigation; we find out the nature of experience for ourselves. The guided meditation at the end of this lesson is designed to lead to this type of exploration, to enable one to discover the same kind of impersonal quality of experience for oneself. This type of exploration is not a mind game in which one tries to rearrange patterns of thinking or experience just for the sake of the rearrangement itself. The point is that this re-visioning of experience can have a very radical effect on the way one experiences who and what one is.

Working with the Self

Ajahn Sumedho is a great meditation master. At times, he would say to his monks and nuns, “As soon as I think about myself, I feel depressed.” The natural response is to think that Ajahn Sumedho has a problem with depression. But if one practises meditation in this way for some time, one begins to notice that as soon as one thinks about oneself, as soon as one looks at life in terms of one’s preferences, what one likes, what one wants, or what one is, or could be, should be, might have been, might still be, etc., a contraction happens in the body and mind around the “self.” If one shifts the frame of reference from the self to nature as a whole, one finds that nature has a naturally spacious and calming quality to it. On the other hand, one feels a stickiness or density in the presence of “me-ness.”

Human beings long for freedom. We all try to find a place, a position, a livelihood or a relationship within which we can be a free person. But meditation helps one discover that “I” can never be free. The *person* can never be free because the person, the ego, is the prison.

It is important to remember that the ego is not an enemy, an evil monster that one must get rid of. The ego is very useful. It is a very handy social tool. We need individual identities to function in society. For example, if one did not have an individual identity, when getting pulled over on the highway by a police officer or trying to cash a check at a bank and being asked for identification, how would one respond? Identities are necessary in order to function in the world.

But with meditation one starts to investigate the feeling of “I-ness” and “me-ness” and “my-ness.” One comes to realize that this feeling is ephemeral; it comes into being and it fades away, just like everything else in nature. As one develops the meditation, one starts to see more and more layers of what one thinks one is – the memories, the thoughts, the moods, the feelings, the ideas that make up what one perceives as the self. One sees that these memories, thoughts, moods, feelings, ideas, are not who and what one is.

One begins to look at what it is that experiences that feeling of I, me and mine, to reflect on that and work with it. By investigating what it is that knows, a quality of relief and ease arises with the knowledge that the memories, thoughts, moods, feelings, and ideas are not who and what one is. They are just passing patterns of experience.

Knowing What We Are is Not the Point

In the 45 years during which he taught after his enlightenment, the Buddha was quite determined not to create an idea of precisely what we are. Instead he was very clear about what we are not: our thoughts, our body, our ideas, our moods, our achievements or our faults, our problems. The question may then naturally arise: “What am I? What is the self?”

The Buddha kept reiterating that this is the wrong question. Rather than trying to define what we are, we learn to let go of what we are not. And then the reality of our nature becomes apparent. As soon as one tries to

define what one is with concepts, to define an essence of the self, one is bound to be frustrated. Just as if we try to pour three-dimensional tea into a two-dimensional drawing of a tea cup, the reality cannot fit into the proposed container – and it's not as if a better drawing will help! Intrinsically, it cannot do the job that is being asked of it.

Not finding a conceptual answer to the question of who we are, what we are, can be frustrating to the ordinary mind. People would beg the Buddha to give a direct answer. But the Buddha was absolutely resolute in saying that the important thing is to train the heart to understand and let go of what we are not. Through that knowing, the reality of the fundamental nature of how not only we but all things exist will become apparent. He was clear that the experience of reality cannot be put into concepts or words.

That said, we might come to the conclusion that all conceptual thought is of no substantial use; ironically, the truth is far from this.

Using the Conceptual Mind in Meditation

When one starts to meditate, one begins to notice that the initial experience can be like having three or four radios on simultaneously, all on different stations. One may feel that it would be nice just to stop thinking, to be able to switch all of the stations off, that this would be peaceful. In that way, one can start to believe that the goal of meditation is wiping out all thoughts.

It is true that in meditation we train the mind to become calm and focused in order to reduce the thinking to a degree, or even on occasion to make the mind completely quiet. But, just like having a conventional identity, rational thought can be an extraordinarily useful tool. A few well-placed thoughts can save one a lot of confusion, even in meditation. One can use thought in meditation, for example, to realize that one is suffering because one is not getting what one wants and to see that this has been going on for quite a while. This realization can ease that suffering, as one begins to let go of wanting what one is not getting.

The Nature of Contemplation

Even though ordinarily, we think about knowledge, ideas, and understanding in terms of rational, discursive thinking and having a good conceptual framework, in this context, contemplation does not mean using the mind to try to sort things out logically. Rather, when the mind is focused and steady, the quality of the attention one can then bring to whatever is arising is spacious, open, and embracing. The focus is not on a particular object like the breath. Rather, a thought or feeling arises naturally, and the mind can investigate it within that space of openness. One can do this with any attribute of life or aspect of spiritual teachings.

For example, one notices the arising of terror at the thought of dying, or the arising of excitement at

the thought of a particular kind of experience. Or the thought arises that one feels most genuine and fulfilled when helping someone else. Through the meditation as practised in the first two lessons, one has established a steadiness in the mind that allows for an open field of experience, the fertile space of the mind. Then, within that space, a thought arises naturally, or one chooses a thought to drop into it, like the thought of dying or of helping others. One allows the intuitive wisdom of the heart that is present in that open and fertile space to be seeded by that thought, and then examines the nature of one's experience within the quality of that space. For example, one can look at why it feels good to be praised but uncomfortable to be criticized. One drops the question or reflection into the pool and then watches what crystallizes from it.

This is very different from trying to figure things out logically; it's a much more spacious process. When one contemplates in this way, the thought or pattern being contemplated takes shape for a moment and then, as one contemplates it, one touches into the nature of all things. This is because the heart and mind are of the same nature as the universe which, in Buddhist language, is described as Dhamma. The fundamental nature of our being is Dhamma or reality, which is intrinsically related or connected to the nature of all things. In this way, through contemplation, we discover our intrinsic attunement to all of life.

Being with the Mystery

As human beings, we are constantly asking questions like, “What is this about?” “How does this connect with that?” The response may arise in the mind that the connection is a mystery, that we can’t understand it. With ordinary conceptual thought, we try to replace the mystery, or the not knowing, with an idea or a belief, or with an answer we derive by using logic. When the ego meets the unknown, it experiences fear, anxiety or terror, and wants to fill it up with knowledge or belief, or a plan, with something that makes it feel secure. But with contemplation we find the heart is more at ease in not knowing, in leaving these questions as a mystery. We approach them from the heart rather than from the ego or the thinking mind. The heart is much more at ease with not knowing, with experiencing the unknown as a mystery and with a feeling of wonderment.

The fundamental distinction between the ordinary conceptual mind and the mind in contemplation or insight practice, between thinking and knowing, in the way that we use this term in Buddhist practice, is that this type of knowing is not a knowing about something. It is not about acquiring facts. It is the quality of awareness itself; this is the key piece. We usually think of knowing as having data, recognizing a pattern, knowing how something works. However, the aim of this other approach to knowing is to establish the heart in pure awareness, in intuitive wisdom, in the pattern that recognizes the quality of our

being that is intrinsically attuned to the whole of the living universe.

Even Just for a Moment

This is not an easy practice. But this awareness can arise as even just a momentary realization; it can happen in half a second or less. In the time that it takes to snap one's fingers, as the Buddha taught, one can have the realization that one is not one's thoughts or moods, that everything is changing, or that nothing can really be possessed, or that the story of experience is really just happening inside oneself.

In the Buddhist view of the world, one's actions have results, and one tries to act in ways that are good so that the results of those actions will also be good. This is the idea of "karma." In Asia, where the Buddha lived and taught, the making of offerings, especially to monastics, is a very important practice for creating good karma, and therefore is a major part of the practice of Buddhism for laypeople. And holding in the heart an attitude of what Buddhists call *mettā* or "loving-kindness" is another very important practice for creating good karma. The Buddha taught that making offerings of valuable gifts to the poor, to the spiritual community, or even to the fully enlightened Buddha would not be as spiritually beneficial as bringing forth loving-kindness in the heart for the time it takes to milk a cow (which is about 20 minutes).

Even so, the Buddha taught that one creates even more good karma by holding the insight that everything is

always changing merely for the duration of a finger-snap. One finger-snap of clarity into the nature of how things really are outweighs the good karma of any quantity of material offerings. Now that's something to think about...

Vipassanā: Insight Practice

In Pali, the language of the Buddha, this practice is called *vipassanā*. *Vipassanā* simply means “looking inwards” or insight. *Vi* here means inwards, *passati* is the verb “to see.” The looking inwards is *vipassanā*.

In addition to referring to the methodology used to look inwards, *vipassanā* also means the change of heart that comes with the realization of freedom, of inner spaciousness. This insight is the most important piece. In the guided meditation that follows, we'll aim to look at this in some depth.



GUIDED MEDITATION

THREE

Attending to the Body

Bring the attention into the body. Notice how you're holding yourself, how the body feels. From that starting point, gently let the body stretch upwards, let the spine straighten; this will help bring a quality of attention, of alertness, to the mind. With the spine as the central column – as the axis of the body – let the rest of the body soften and relax around it.

Befriend your own body, allow it to be at ease and to settle. Notice if there is any tension in the muscles of the face... the shoulders... the stomach. Wherever you find any tension, gently let yourself relax. Let the muscles soften around the eyes and the mouth; let the shoulders drop a little. Let the belly loosen and spread... fully at ease.

Perceive the body within the space of your awareness. Rest within the faculty of knowing that is operating all the time, focusing on the body.

Narrowing the Attention to the Breath

Once the body is well settled and the posture is firm and steady, narrow the attention to rest upon the breath.

Not changing the breath to make it longer or deeper, not controlling it in any way... just feeling the body breathing, letting this simple rhythm be the very centre of your attention, as if the mind were a great open field, a great space.

Trace the pattern of sensations the breath makes. Find the centre of the breath, feeling it like the centre of a mandala or a flower. Feel the body breathing. Follow each inhalation from beginning to end... each exhalation from beginning to end.

Working with Distractions

If the mind hears a sound, jumps upon it and gets carried away, or is caught up in a stray memory... an idea... an echo of the day you've just been through... anything that pulls the attention away from the focus on the breath, treat the mind with a kindly and gentle attitude. Cooperate, collaborate with the mind. Don't struggle against it or fight it.

As soon as you notice that the mind has drifted off and run away, consciously and gently loosen your hold on whatever it is the mind has grabbed onto. Relax and let it go. Come back to the centre again. The sounds, the thoughts, and the feelings of the body – let them stay around the periphery. Let the breath, the cluster of feelings, be at the very heart of your attention – the focal point.

Slowly turn the attention to rest more and more steadily on the present moment. Let the thoughts happen here and now. Just let them come and go. For the time being, just let the attention rest upon the breath.

Letting Go of the Breath and Resting in Knowing

If you find the mind becoming a little more steady, resting more easily in the present moment, so that you are mindfully aware of the sounds that you hear and the feelings that arise – the different strands of thought – at that point you can let go of the feeling of the breath as a central focus. Let go of the cluster of sensations that accompany the breath as the centre of the space of awareness. Experience the open field of the mind, letting go of the breath as the particular focus. Step back and just let the breath be one more object... one more pattern of experience... taking shape in the field of the mind. Notice the weight of your body on the ground, the sounds of cars and birds and people, different thoughts and moods, whatever feelings arise, such as tiredness or inspiration, any memories or plans, as they appear in the field of the mind.

Let the heart rest in the quality of knowing, of simply observing. Feel the flow of the patterns of experience. Let go of the content; let go of the stories. Just witness it all... know it all as patterns of nature taking shape, arising, changing, fading. Just be that spacious knowing that embraces it all, welcomes it all in, as if the heart were breathing every moment in... knowing it... letting it go... and breathing it out.

Reflecting on the Nature of Experience

To help provide a little leverage on thoughts and perceptions and feelings, use a reflection like, “It’s changing, let it go.” Or, “Is this really *mine*? Let it go.” As you see and recognize patterns of nature, let them go. As you develop this way of knowing, see the effect it has on the heart, the effect of relinquishing, of releasing.

Re-Establishing the Attention

If you find the mind easily gets lost and carried away, swept up in the current, re-establish the attention on the breath for a moment or two. Come back to the body and check your posture. Let the body relax and straighten. Re-focus the attention on the present. When the mind steadies again, let go of the breath or the body as a focus of attention. This practice is guiding the mind and the heart towards being established in this knowing quality, taking in the pattern of each moment... not grasping hold... not pushing away.

Cultivating Insight

As you learn to let go, begin to notice if the experience of a *thought*, which we perceive as being “inside” ourselves, really differs from the experience of a *sound*, which we habitually perceive as “outside.” Examine the feeling of “my-ness”... “here-ness” and “there-ness.” Notice these as simple patterns.

To Whom do These Feelings Belong?

What is it That Owns Them?

As you let go, as the heart releases, notice what that feeling is like. Notice the feeling of not even clinging to a sense of “I,” or “me,” or “mine.” Just a simple, pure, open knowing... aware of everything. Attune to that feeling. Let it all go.

End of Meditation

QUESTION AND ANSWER

THREE

Q: In these lessons, the words “heart” and “mind” seem to be used interchangeably at times. Could you speak about the difference – or is there a difference?

A: The words “heart” and “mind” have different connotations in English. In the Buddhist scriptural language, Pali, there are three main words to describe these: *mano*, *citta*, and *viññāna*. Generally speaking, in common usage in English, the word “mind” has the connotation of mental activity. We think in terms of “my mind,” or “she’s got an incredible mind,” meaning that “she’s smart” or “she knows all the facts.” In Buddhist tradition, we talk about mindfulness as a crucial quality of paying attention to the present moment. One of the key meditation teachings in our scriptures is called “The Four Foundations of Mindfulness.”

The word “heart” has a naturally warm, expansive quality to it. I’ve begun to toy with re-rendering the title of that key teaching as “The Four Foundations of Heartfulness,” because the brain is a useful character, but it does tend to co-opt our experience. The word “mind” often gets associated with brain activity and, as we are all aware, if the brain has half a chance it will wade in and

steal the show! Oftentimes people relate to “mindfulness” as a head-centred quality, and it gets a bit cramped. Whereas “heartfulness” or “the heart” brings the centre of gravity a bit lower.

In some Buddhist texts, there is mention of “Mind” with a big “M,” and the ordinary mind, or discriminating mind, with a small “m.” “Mind” with a big “M” is the more expansive mind – what we might call the heart. We also use terms like “original mind.” The verses from the Third Zen Patriarch say, “To seek Mind with the discriminating mind is the greatest of all mistakes.” It’s as impossible as the wave looking for the sea. In a way, you have to figure out which principle is meant from the context. In the Tibetan tradition, they tend to talk about “mind” with a small “m” as meaning discriminating mind, while they use a term like “Mind Essence” for “heart” or the expansive quality. Generally, there’s a distinction between those two faculties, that quality of transcendent knowing, which we call “big mind” or “heart,” and the discriminative conceptual mind. Most Buddhist traditions make those distinctions. However, you have to keep your ear cocked to figure out exactly how the words are being used.

Q: Is conceptual, verbal thought an aspect of meditation? How do I hold this kind of verbal thought?

A: Words can be awkward, but we need them to communicate. It would be a very esoteric and possibly not very useful teaching if I just came and sat here, and just “was.” So, talking is handy but words can only take us so far. We might use a word like “heart” to lead us into

the space of contemplation. The idea is to use the word as if it were scaffolding. You put scaffolding up to work in a space, but you don't leave the scaffolding up once the work is done, because it will just get in the way. You use words just like scaffolding. You put them in place to get the job done but then you move them out of the way. The point is getting the job done, not having the scaffolding there.

So you might use a word like "heart" to counteract the busyness or the fragmented quality of the mind, or just to remind you of that fundamental spaciousness. And then you leave the word alone. The word helps to open up the space, and then you just leave it. The point is then to allow the awareness of that space to percolate – to be known. And in contemplation, when a theme arises on its own, it might not even be verbal.

Q: What is intuition in this context? You talked about contemplation, and planting the seeds of a question and seeing what intuitively arises. Could you talk a little bit more about intuition?

A: When I alluded to intuition, I used that word to refer to the idea that our minds are intrinsically intelligent. There's a natural quality, an aspect of our being, that recognizes the patterns of the universe. The Judaeo-Christian inheritance is one of "me" as separate from the rest of the world and feeling alienated. But this meditation practice and these teachings point to the realization that "I" am not separate. Every breath is an exchange of air with others. I breathe air out and then you breathe it in.

The same air goes into the plants here and produces a flower. The line between what is me and what is not me, on a physical level, starts to blur.

As we explore the mind in a similar way, we begin to see that the barriers between the mental and the physical are also arbitrary in some respects. We begin to question how “my” mind, and “my” physical being, could somehow be intrinsically and absolutely disconnected or different from everything else. It is not possible that I could be the one thing in the entire universe that does not belong to nature. Thinking that I am disconnected or different from everything else is somewhat arrogant, in fact is very deluded! On the psychological level we can feel a disconnection, that everybody else is part of the natural order, that I’m the one wrong piece. But when you think about it clearly, even when you say it, you know that it’s ridiculous! But emotionally we can feel that way, can’t we?

So with this practice, what we’re doing is opening up to the fact that our nature is intrinsically inseparable from the rest of nature. And the place where we are most completely connected is on the level of the heart. The essence of my heart, my being, what I am, is also the nature of all being. How could that possibly get separated from the nature of all the rest of it? There’s one nature, one fundamental natural order that’s in relationship with itself constantly.

To use a computer analogy, when we consciously draw upon our intuition, it’s like plugging into the port; the heart is like your server, or a telephone exchange in

the old parlance. On a computer the port is where your connection to the Internet is accessed, and in life, the heart is where your connection to the web of life is based. You connect by tapping into that fundamental quality of your own heart. We're tapping into our own nature, and that nature is intrinsically connected to all of nature.

Even though our brain might not be able to figure out how things are working or what's happening, our heart is connected regardless. We intuit – the heart knows – the right thing to do at each moment. Rather than trying to figure everything out by logic – or doing things out of habit, out of what fits our opinions, or out of what everyone expects, or being guided by the dozens of different ways our actions and views can be affected – we open up to this inner intelligence, this intuitive wisdom and then we ask the question: “What’s the right thing to do here?”

By doing this, we draw upon the intrinsic attunement or unity of our nature with the nature of all things. For example, we might not be able to figure a situation out with our conceptual minds; we might be in doubt about what to do. But by using our intuition, what might then arise is the idea of not doing anything, or moving, or that it's really not clear and that, at the moment, there really is no answer. These thoughts are not coming from a place of reasoning or of habit, but from a direct attunement to the here-and-now.

It's similar to the feeling that guides a musician when playing music with others. Any one of the musicians can't

follow exactly what all the other instruments are doing or systematically track all the different shifts of mood of all the other players. That one musician can't keep track of all of this, do all the calculations. But the musician can feel it! Similarly, sports or dancing are very physical, mobile, active, and when you're involved with them, something in you knows what to do. You're able to attune to the situation. Like Obi Wan Kenobi said to Luke Skywalker, "Don't think, Luke. Use the Force!" That's what we're doing; we're drawing upon that natural attunement.

You can call it your higher nature, or your divine inspiration, or whatever you like. As Ajahn Sumedho once said, "You can call it Montague if you like!" You can call it guidance by God or the Goddess, by the Great Whatever It Is – or you can just call it your intuitive wisdom, that quality that is able to guide and to steer our choices and views reliably. Another expression I use, which is a little New Age-y but I'll go with it anyway, is "consulting your own oracle." If you don't consult the oracle, you don't get the feedback. So we just take the trouble to make that inquiry – not in a blur of mental activity and verbiage, but in a quiet moment and with a clear direction, ask: "What is the right thing to do here?" "What do I feel about this?"

Intuition is connecting with that sense of true knowing, rather than with reason or habit. It's a quality of direct attunement, so we can trust it.

We can be guided by it with a much greater surety than if we think our way to a solution. If we habitually think things through logically, calculating all the pros

and cons, there's still a doubt. We're trying to think our way to the end of uncertainty. It's like a courtroom battle; the other lawyer will always come up with an argument. If A and B are sparring with each other, as soon as you pile up the evidence and think, "Okay, definitely, this is the right thing to do," what follows immediately is, "Yes, but on the other hand...". And if you force a decision, the other lawyer will appeal! And around it goes again. Thus, rather than trying to think our way to the end of a doubt, to figure out what to do or what's right, we just listen to our own hearts, drawing upon that inner wisdom. What we may find is that we need to leave the situation alone, or that there's no answer so we can stop worrying or, interestingly, that we're asking the wrong question.

Intuition is a tremendously important quality. In Buddhist practice, there are different words for it: one is *prajña* in Sanskrit or *paññā* in Pali, which means wisdom, or *lokuttara-paññā*, which means transcendent wisdom. You don't need any kind of complicated apparatus to tap into your intuition. It just takes a moment to reflect – to look within. As long as we're direct and clear in that moment, then what will arise will emerge from and resonate with that same kind of clarity.

As human beings, this is familiar to all of us. Every culture relates to this in different ways: you may have The Ancestors talking to you, or hear the Messages From Above, or whatever. We articulate it in different ways, but the process is identical.

Q: Is this the same as “Buddha nature,” which is inherent in all beings?

A: You could say so. “Buddha” means “The One Who is Awake.” The Buddha who lived two-and-a-half thousand years ago was an embodiment of that quality. As my teacher, Ajahn Chah, would often say, “People believe the Buddha passed away two-and-a-half thousand years ago, but the real Buddha is alive today.” The “Buddha” we are talking about here is that quality of wakefulness – that quality of wisdom – which is in the heart. When we draw upon that Buddha-wisdom, it’s as if we can consult the Buddha any time. If we don’t make the effort to consult, then we won’t get the advice or the guidance. Buddha nature is another term for this faculty of awakenedness that we can employ. Of course, we can go through life without employing it, just having it buried in layers of habit and compulsion and busyness and fear and laziness and everything else. But if we take the trouble to draw upon it, to recognize it, to open it up, then it can be what guides our lives very directly.

Q: So it’s not the same as you were mentioning – intuition?

A: No, I would say that that Buddha-wisdom is the same as intuitive wisdom. You can call it by different names, but it’s that quality of knowing. It’s rather like putting on a shoe and it fits. You don’t have to think about the shoe fitting; you know it fits before you articulate the words. It’s a knowing that is wordless, practical, grounded; it is the quality of awareness itself.

Q: Does it apply to all beings?

A: Yes. If you're an animal, it's more densely buried under the layers of instinct. The great benefit of a human life is that we have the faculty to not just be conscious or alert, but to have the capacity to reflect. We don't just know, we know that we know.



LESSON

FOUR

THE GIVING AND RECEIVING HEART

The theme of “The Giving and Receiving Heart” is very significant in Buddhist meditation, particularly in the southern Asian Buddhist countries in which the Theravāda tradition is practised, that is, Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia and India. In the language the Buddha spoke, “Theravāda” means “the way of the elders,” as it aims to follow the standards of the earliest students of the Buddha. It is one of the oldest schools of Buddhism in Asia.

The quality of loving-kindness, or *mettā*, which is called here the practice of the giving and receiving heart, has been sustained in this tradition along with the other elements of meditation practice – concentration and insight – that are covered to some extent in the previous

lessons. This quality is very heavily emphasized in this tradition. In the guided meditation at the end of this chapter, a few methods of developing it will be explored. There is really no English equivalent to the word *mettā*. It has been translated as “loving-kindness,” “loving friendliness,” or “universal kindness.” To explain the character of this quality, the Buddha used the example of the love a mother has for her only child: unquestioning, unconditional affection. The aim of *mettā* practice, of loving-kindness, is to cultivate and develop that quality so that we will have that same kind of unquestioning benevolence, of unconditional kindness, towards all other beings regardless of their relationship to us or their qualities, whether they are humans or animals, whether they are friendly, indifferent or hostile, whatever their nature; the aim is to develop this kind of caring and friendliness towards all beings.

Developing the Giving Heart

One way to develop this quality is through a particular meditation technique that begins by imagining or thinking of someone we love dearly, someone towards whom we feel an automatic sense of affection and kindness or warmth. This can be, for example, a child, a partner, or even a pet. We bring to mind an image of that being in order to arouse that quality, an instinctual, complete and unequivocal sense of affection and kindness.

Spreading the Quality Spatially

We make the feeling fully conscious and then begin to extend it. There are different ways to do this. First, for example, we can extend the mettā in a spatial way.

We begin by spreading loving-kindness towards ourselves. Oftentimes, in the Judaeo-Christian culture in which we live, “number one” is lost on the affection list. We think of loving ourselves as a gross indulgence or an inflated quality; liking ourselves is unseemly and definitely unspiritual. But the Buddha pointed out that if we cannot have loving-kindness towards ourselves, then we cannot possibly have real loving-kindness towards any other being. So, all the different styles of practising loving-kindness meditation begin with kindness towards ourselves.

Everyone has certain personality traits they would rather do without or wish they could eliminate. So, in the beginning, it can be easier to relate to the idea of generating loving-kindness towards the body rather than to try to develop loving-kindness or benevolence towards the personality. We can feel the kind of friendliness and affection towards our own body that we have towards a pet, for example, towards our dog. When the master treats the dog with affection, the dog responds with great glee and is incredibly happy because the master is paying attention to it. The response is joyful, vigorous and friendly. Similarly, when we fill the body with the quality of attention and kindness, the body responds. The body

cheers up a bit, and there is more energy and vitality, a quality of balance and vigour.

After beginning by filling our own being with this quality of kindness, we can expand it spatially. First, we extend the loving-kindness to other people in the room, then to the other beings in the building, and then slowly spread it out through the area of the town, the district, the county, the state, and all over the country.

Depending on how graphic the imagination is, we can witness this spreading as a warm, golden light slowly expanding across the face of the nation, north, south, in all directions, slowly and gently encircling the entire globe. Everywhere it reaches, it touches all creatures: plants and animals, insects, birds, fishes, all creatures small and great, and all human beings. This includes those in a good situation or in a painful situation, those who are beautiful or ugly, those who are sick, who are just born, and who are just dying. The imagination can play with all kinds of images. We can visualize the quality of loving-kindness encircling, embracing the entire planet, and even beyond that – spreading out from this little blue ball floating in this particular patch of the cosmos throughout the universe.

Using Different Categories of Beings

Another methodology to develop this quality is to go through the different categories of beings. Having begun with ourselves, we extend the feeling of loving-kindness to the beings we love, those who are very dear to us. Then

we extend the feeling to those to whom we are indifferent. We then extend the feeling to those with whom we have conflict, or people who dislike us, or people towards whom we have feelings of aversion and negativity. We then spread this quality to the rest of the human realm, to people we do not know, those whom we admire, those to whom we are indifferent, those by whom we feel threatened or towards whom we feel aversion, even if we don't know them personally. We extend this feeling to all different categories of human beings: the attractive, the neutral, and the unattractive.

After going through all types of human beings, we work our way through all of the other categories of beings. We can have a lot of fun imagining all the many-footed creatures, or the tiny microorganisms, or even the non-sentient elements of our world, the plants and the rocks and the streams. Or we can imagine the great beings, the elephants and whales; imagine creatures of all sizes. The idea of "all beings" also includes beings in other, invisible realms. These can be ghosts, or angelic beings, or demonic beings in other dimensions of the cosmos.

Depending on what is most effective for us, we can do this visualization in this particular order or be more free-form and sculpt it as we choose. However we want to do it, we can create different patterns of spreading this feeling from the heart, the centre of our being, which is the generator of this beautiful sentiment and intention. We send forth the noble aspiration to meet every being with a quality of kindness and friendliness. This is the giving heart.

The Receiving Heart

During a meditation retreat, whether it is a day-long, a weekend, or a 10-day retreat, there is usually a guided meditation on mettā or loving-kindness. At this point, it is not uncommon for a participant to report that, until the mettā meditation, the retreat was going really well, but with the mettā meditation, enormous irritation arose. The participant felt annoyed at being asked to spread affection over the world when all that was felt was the inner grouch, the inner Scrooge that didn't want to be bothered with any such sentimental nonsense; enormous resistance arose to the idea of glossing everything over with loving-kindness.

It can happen that the inner cynic gets roused as soon as we feel that we must be nice to everyone. This can result from a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of what is meant by loving-kindness. We can feel as though we are forcing ourselves to like everyone, as if we are obligated to see the world through a Walt Disneyesque pair of glasses. We think that we are supposed to have an attitude that "everything is nice." Something in the heart can recoil from that.

It is important to understand that loving-kindness is not an attitude of trying to make oneself like everything. Having loving-kindness towards other beings – towards those who are harmful and destructive as well as those who are cuddly and pure-hearted – does not mean that we approve of their actions or pretend to like them. Rather, we are working to accept that this is the way

things are right now. This is the receiving heart, the heart that accepts the way things are. We are also not trying to pretend that the bitter is sweet, or that cruelty is beautiful, or that anger is a wonderful thing. Bitterness, cruelty and anger are a part of life, however. Violence, selfishness, and jealousy are part of nature. They exist as elements of the natural world.

The Buddha often got the attention of his students with stories or similes with very graphic images, because this is one way that allows people to remember things easily. In this vein, one of the main teachings the Buddha gave on loving-kindness was a story that contained a simile. The Buddha asked the listeners to imagine that they were kidnapped by bandits, and that the bandits were sawing their arms and legs off with a two-handled saw. He then said that anyone who gave rise to a thought of hatred towards those people on that account would not be practising his teachings. The Buddha was not teaching that we should enjoy this torture or that we should be apologizing to the bandits for the fact that our sinews are so tough, that we should not have eaten so much protein because it wouldn't be so much work for them to chop us up. His teaching is intended to point out the self-centred gesture in the heart that makes somebody "other" or "evil," that makes them intrinsically and absolutely bad or wrong, and to recognize that any movement of the heart in that direction is fundamentally out of accord with reality.

Even though what is happening can be painful, shocking, or unwanted, by practising loving-kindness we are

able to find the space in the heart where we do not dwell in aversion or negativity towards other beings. This is something that we can do. The Buddha used this particularly graphic example to highlight the tendency we have to believe that at times a little bit of hatred may be reasonable or justified. But the Buddha teaches that this is never true, that as soon as we make someone “other,” as soon as we discriminate and make another being into something intrinsically apart, separate, or wrong, then we have at that moment lost touch with the reality of the situation.

Practising Mettā to Establish Peace in the Mind

Practising in this way is not a special kind of technique that one uses alongside of concentration practice or insight practice. It is more a matter of establishing the qualities of real kindness and acceptance as the basis of all meditation. We may consider ourselves to be nice and kind; mild, gentle people; to think that we don't experience problems with violence or anger. But we may also find that in starting to practise meditation, unwanted thoughts and feelings come up and, in turn, we discover ourselves feeling extraordinary aversion towards them. We try to make the discursive mind shut up and go away. The meditation becomes a fight to wipe out thought, feeling, anger or distraction so that we can be peaceful and experience a more spiritual life. The very method we have chosen to establish peace is completely disturbing.

An important element of Buddhist practice is to understand that the means and the end are completely unified. In Buddhist understanding, the means does not justify the end. Rather, the means is the end. If we use harsh and aggressive means to control the mind, to wipe out distraction, to force the mind not to feel fear or aversion or desire, that fierce, aggressive, discordant attitude will influence the result. Whereas if we use a gentle, peaceful and harmonious means to work with the mind, the natural result will be that the mind will reflect those same qualities.

Kindness towards Oneself

Working with kindness towards oneself in meditation does not mean just sitting back and thinking that whatever happens in the meditation is fine, just letting the mind do whatever it wants. Instead, practising mettā in this way is similar to the way a mother trains a child or an owner a pet. The mother doesn't simply let the child do whatever the child wants to do; some discipline needs to be established. Similarly, in meditation, we establish the basis of kindness by first recognizing that everything belongs in our meditation, nothing should be left out. The distractive thought belongs. The focus on the breath belongs. The wave of anger belongs. The wave of fear, the restless sensations, the fantasies, they all belong, along with the benevolent and pure thoughts.

That quality of absolute belonging, that everything has its place, is the basis of loving-kindness, of wholehearted

acceptance. Then, on that basis of wholehearted acceptance, we bring in discriminative wisdom. This means that we recognize the value of training the mind to focus, like seeing the value in training a three-year-old how to handle a spoon, how to feed herself; or in toilet-training a child; or housebreaking a puppy. Seeing the need to train a child or an animal in this way is not solving a spiritual problem, but is, rather, seeing the value in a practical necessity. Similarly, we can see that there is a value in training the mind to develop awareness. But this training does not happen by starting a war against thought or by hating emotions.

For example, if we want to drive to a particular place that is north of where we are, we drive north, not south. That does not mean that south is bad or wrong or evil. Similarly, in meditation, we do not hold the attitude that a thought, an emotion, or an idea is evil. We simply do not want to follow the mind in that direction. We want the mind to focus on the breath rather than on plans or memories or problem solving. So the discrimination is made on the basis of practicality and simplicity, not on wanting the thought or feeling to be eradicated because it does not belong or by trying to force the mind to behave using a Draconian methodology. We direct the mind by applying intention and effort with wholehearted acceptance and benevolence. It's a cooperative effort with our nature, not a struggle against it.



GUIDED MEDITATION

FOUR

Begin Where You Are

Begin by taking note of how you feel. What is the mood right now? Before trying to do anything with the body or the mind, just check in on how you feel physically and mentally. How does your body feel... what is your mood? There's no right or wrong starting place. Just see whether you're happy or unhappy, tired or energetic, hot, cold. Whatever it is, that is where you start from. Just begin by acknowledging and appreciating your starting point.

Bring the Attention into the Body

Now bring the attention into the body. Notice how the body feels. Focus for a moment on the spine. Let the body grow upwards, reach, allow the spine to lengthen... to stretch a little, bringing a quality of attentiveness and alertness.

When you find the spine is settled into a good, strong upright form, let the rest of the body relax around that. Take a moment to sweep the attention from the top of the head all the way through the body... out to the fingertips... down to the feet. Wherever you find any tension, let the body relax that tension. Fully allow yourself to soften... to settle... to be at ease at this moment.

Developing Unconditional Affection and Friendliness

Draw the attention to the heart centre, to the centre of the chest. Feel the rhythm of the breath right there. Don't try to change the breath or do anything with it. Just focus the attention in the very heart. Feel the body breathing... following its own rhythm.

Now, in whatever way feels most comfortable, bring to mind a person or an animal, such as a beloved pet, for whom you have complete and unconditional affection, the greatest degree of warmth and friendliness. This can be a person or animal who is alive or who has passed away. Bring this being to mind in whatever unique way and in whatever form that being manifests for you; you can even focus on the love and devotion you feel for a divine being.

Hold that being in your heart in whatever way they manifest for you. Feel the quality of unreserved love and kindness, warmth, acceptance of that person or being. Avoid getting caught up in any stories about that being or yourself; simply bring that quality of their presence to mind, holding it in the heart and feeling the warmth and openness that arises.

Make their presence and the warmth it invokes the spark that kindles your heart. Use the image of the flame that ignites the candle, the spark that ignites this quality of mettā (benevolence) within your heart. The fire, having been lit, generates light and warmth in the heart.

With each in-breath visualize that in breathing in the air of the room, you are breathing in the energy of the present

moment, breathing in the situation, the pattern of this present moment. Breathe the energy of the present into the heart on the in-breath, transforming the energy of the present moment, the sounds you hear, the feelings, the thoughts, the air, into this light of loving-kindness.

As you breathe out, imagine that light spreading from your heart, reaching out into your body, as if your heart were like a lamp, a light source, taking in the fuel of each moment, transforming it, and slowly spreading it through the body... reaching from the heart... spreading through the chest... slowly filtering through you.

Filling the Body with Loving-kindness

With each out-breath, spread the light further and further through the body. Fill the body with this quality of friendliness. Feel the kindness towards your physical being... your organs, your bones, your blood, your muscles, your joints.

With each out-breath, slowly permeate the body, out to the limits of the skin, with loving-kindness like a warm, gentle golden light filling the whole frame of the body, slowly and gently soaking into every corner, to the fingertips... the toes... the bones... the organs.

With each in-breath, sustain this quality of taking in the energy of this moment and transforming it in the heart... the heart breathing it forth, spreading it forth, until the body is swelling, filled and brimming with this gentle, bright energy of kindness. Fully accept the body as it is, with all its strengths and weaknesses, powers and ailments. Love it just the way it is, accept it just the way it is.

Spreading the Light

As the body gets filled with the presence of this energy, filled with this bright benevolence, slowly that light starts to filter through the skin, spreading around you, so your whole body becomes a beacon, a light source. The heart breathes in the energy of this moment, and breathes out – pours forth – the same quality of affection, spreading out and radiating from the heart... throughout the whole room, filling all the space of this chamber and passing through all the bodies and beings of everyone gathered in this room. It fills the whole space with a kindly attitude of well-wishing.

With each out-breath, spread it further... stronger... gently pouring forth... spreading beyond the bounds of the room... reaching out and spreading forth from the building... reaching out through the town... to the trees and streets... the air... the cars... the buildings... without discrimination... through the houses of your friends... through the courthouse... the stores... the shops... the empty spaces... the offices... the local jail... the schools and playing fields... passing through people, dogs, cats, cockroaches, all the beings of the area. Feel and imagine this light spreading, surrounding, and permeating the entire space of the town, passing through every wall, every creature, every face. Gently spreading forth, reaching forth, generated by this very heart of ours, steadily, incessantly breathing in the energy of the moment and transforming it into this living light, this kindly well-wishing, reaching forth, filling the whole area, the whole limits of the town.

With each breath, the range of the light gets stronger, reaching forth, spreading through the whole area outside of the town. Reaching across the county... across the hills... through

the trees, the forest... across the rivers... the creeks... the springs... through the dens of foxes and bears... under the ground through the rocks and subterranean waters... through the air... encompassing and filling the birds... the insects... the butterflies... the creatures of the water... all the people of the hills and the valleys... woven in and out of the whole county... across the vineyards... the pear orchards... the wild forests... the lakes... the roads. Spreading the light forth to the ocean... to the crashing waves on the shore... out to the lakes... the forests of the north... the vineyards and farms of the south. Each breath gets larger, the power of the heart grows greater... spreading this light without discrimination, incessantly, pouring it forth.

Now spread this light out beyond the county, reach across the ocean... under the waters... permeating all the sea creatures... the fishes, whales, turtles, jellyfish, tiny microscopic plankton, the creatures of the shore in the rock pools. Spread this light to the cities, to those thousands of acres of buildings and tarmac, teeming with people in all states of being. Spread the light to the poor, to the prisoners, and to the rich, spreading it through all the regions of the state, sweeping forth in all directions, reaching and spreading with each breath, to the fertile places, the dry places, the cold, the hot, the wet, high and low, reaching through every corner... the heart, the generator of this great light, inexhaustible.

Reach across the whole country to the north and to the south. And across the ocean, reach out, wrapping, reaching, spreading. Visualize the whole earth slowly being embraced, enclosed, encompassed, the light of loving-kindness surrounding the whole planet, like fingers gently and slowly enclosing and embracing the whole globe.

From the very heart, the infinitely resourceful, inexhaustible heart, spread this gentle light. Reach, enfold, and embrace the whole planet, this beautiful green and blue jewel. Spread the light to all the beings of the planet, those at war, those at peace, the saintly, the profane, the violent, the victims, the high and the low, beings in all states of existence, without discrimination, permeating the fabric, the heart, the nature of all beings, through the lands and waters and through the air. Fill the whole planet, surround the whole planet, embracing all with this field of kindness.

Spread forth out into space, beyond the earth to the solar system, to the moon, the sun, Venus, Mars, Mercury, Uranus, Neptune and Pluto. Spread out, reaching without limit, like light itself, incalculably vast, filling the whole of space... the galaxy... the spaces between the galaxies. Fill all of space without discrimination in all directions: up and down, all around you. Without obstruction, fill the entirety of space, the universe, with the presence of this infinite kindness, with unconditional well-wishing, with acceptance. Know that here is the universe and, at this moment, it is filled with kindness.

As you reach to the very edges of the universe, you find a limit, a boundary. Right at the edges of the universe, you find that its limit is the shape of your own body, your shoulders, your legs, the crown of your head. The whole universe is encased within the frame, within this being. You know that the body of the universe is filled with this infinite kindness and acceptance, and you just rest with that feeling, allowing the heart to rest in this quality.

End of Meditation



QUESTION AND ANSWER

FOUR

Q: Is the problem with making something “other” that we refuse to see it, that we close it out or banish it, and therefore we distance ourselves from what’s real?

A: In the gesture of making something “other,” we’re saying that something is intrinsically and absolutely wrong with the universe right now. There is this element of life which doesn’t belong – should not be. Ajahn Chah would say, “If it shouldn’t be this way, it wouldn’t be this way.” He was very good at these one-liners.

It sounds very depressing or fatalistic, but it’s not really. It’s extraordinarily realistic. It’s like saying, “Whether we like it or not, it’s like this.” We’ve all had the feeling that if we were somebody different, or even just a little bit different, things would really be much better. But we are what we are. It’s the ultimate realism to see that, yes, this is painful, or this is unjust, or this is ugly, but this is a fact of nature. And we’re always ready to start from that point. Because if we don’t start from that point... It’s like that old joke: Someone stops their car and asks for directions. They talk to a passer-by who tells them, “You can’t get there from here.” But we have to start from where we are.

Q: Then is our only way to be in touch with reality through the heart?

A: Basically. That's our contact point with the fundamental reality of things.

Q: I can understand emotional acceptance without condoning. But what about acceptance and effecting change in the world? How does acceptance in that kind of situation work?

A: Suzuki Roshi used to say, "Everything is absolutely perfect exactly as it is – but there's always room for improvement!" So, in a way, what we're doing is attuning the heart to the way things are. The way things are includes our own attributes of wisdom, motivation and initiative. It includes our sensitivity to time and place, our own sensitivity to what can be done to make life more peaceful, more beneficial, more safe and free from harm for ourselves and for other beings. So acceptance does not imply a kind of passivity.

Acceptance is not just sitting back and letting things happen however they will. Like the example of training a child or an animal: you don't just let situations unfold as they will without intervention. Our actions and intentions and capacity to alter the world are part of the way the world is. The key is to approach our actions from a position of attunement to reality, not from a reactive opinion, habit, or motivation guided by fear, desire, or irritation, or from a distorted view of reality. If we take action from that basis, we can speak out for the things we believe in and oppose wrongs and injustice quite

vigorously. We don't oppose them because we hate them, or because we look at them as intrinsically "other." We oppose them for the benefit of all beings, knowing that this particular wrong needs to be obstructed. It's just like the case of your child running out into the street chasing after a ball: you grab the child by the shirt, even if that hurts the child, because you see a truck coming and if you don't yank the child back, she's going to get hit. You don't stand on the kerb and "just know the way things are," and watch your child get hit by the truck, with some deluded idea about non-attachment. Ironically that sort of thinking is a very good demonstration of attachment – you are attaching to an opinion about non-attachment and, through clinging to it, end up causing a great deal of distress for yourself and others. Sometimes it's necessary to take an action that makes other people very unhappy, but your motivation is not to make them unhappy. You're doing it out of your own attunement to the greater good. This is always a tricky area, however.

Q: How do you deal with the pain of being in the world and seeing the plight of others?

A: You balance the sense of caring with the qualities of wisdom. A mother needs to attach to her child. If she doesn't attach to her child, the child is in deep trouble. But if the mother becomes possessive of the child, there can be even worse trouble. The skill being cultivated in Buddhist teachings and meditation is the art of

being able to care completely without being caught up in possessiveness.

If you have a child who is experiencing great suffering or is sick, you feel a sense of grief or pain because of the child's difficulty. You don't try to suppress that and pretend that everything's okay or that you're glad this is happening. You can empathize as long as you're not caught up in or identified with the possessiveness. You can empathize with the pain of another being without becoming entangled in it.

The English language doesn't really have a word for this quality. The English word "compassion" literally means "suffering with." It comes from the Latin words *com* + *passio*, which mean "to suffer with." The Buddhist sense of compassion is not quite the same. From the Buddhist point of view, to truly have compassion for other beings is not to be in a state of suffering on account of them, but rather it involves empathizing with the pain another being is feeling without being entangled in it in the same way. In a sense, the greatest gift we can give to another being in a painful state is that complete empathy, without being pulled into their vortex, or sucked into the same feeling of being lost that they might be experiencing.

It's tricky to talk about because of the lack of a word in English to describe this relationship accurately, but this is the quality at which we're aiming. It's not a cold distancing. There is total empathy, but there is no confusion about it. For example, we can experience grief if we lose someone that we love or something's happened that is extremely painful; we can feel immense grief for

some incredibly stupid thing we've done that caused a huge amount of pain and difficulty to others, and even have tears running down our face. However, at the same time, we can feel completely peaceful, even while the loss or conflict or misunderstanding is happening. It's a bit paradoxical. As soon as the mind starts to analyze it or make a story out of it, the genuine feeling stops. As soon as we let go of trying to examine it, explain it, or write a commentary about it, but just let go and allow the feeling to be there, the feeling may actually be stronger, but it can also be held within the embrace of peace and a real mindfulness. The analysis of it may make it less painful, but it also divorces the experience from the reality. So, allowing ourselves to feel the pain of a situation, without confusion, is the aim. We don't cut ourselves off from the experience, but we're not swept up in it.

In so many places around the planet, the Middle East, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and South America, terrible things are happening. If we have kindness without wisdom, compassion without wisdom, we get swept up and carried away, becoming overwhelmed by the extent of the suffering. However, if the kindness is balanced with wisdom, we can empathize with other beings and their pain, but that balance is sustained.

It's a lifetime's occupation, because we don't know how to achieve that balance in our own being. We're either cold and shut off, or swept up and carried away by the floods of feeling. We don't know that middle ground. It takes practice and a lot of experimentation to get the balance right. At first we just realize that we've

been carried off. We can only stay balanced for a second here, a couple of seconds there. But our heart actually knows what that balance feels like. Meditation, in a way, is a process of uncovering that feeling in the heart and learning to trust the sensation of staying balanced, not falling into the extremes of being shut down or carried away by emotion. It's like learning to ride a bicycle when you're a kid. You can pedal a two-wheeler for a second, and then over you go. Slowly, you learn how to balance; you can pedal and stay upright. Similarly, in meditation you slowly find that balance, and you can return to it and then dwell in that space more and more easily.

Q: How is that related to attachment?

A: If we pick something up, we don't necessarily have to attach to it or think that it is ours, in some absolute way. Once we think something is actually ours, there is possessiveness or "clinging" in Buddhist jargon, which causes tension. To let go of clinging to something we've picked up is merely to relax our hold. We don't need to put it down, we just need to relax the grip. We don't have to get rid of things – non-attachment doesn't mean doing without things, like getting rid of your wrist-watch, and your car and your house, or your apartment and your income. So, it's not about not picking things up, because you can pick something up and hold it, and then put it down. That's a useful and very necessary part of life. The problems come with the clinging, the possessiveness, the idea that this is mine and I'm going to have it and keep it.

We can do that with anything we've picked up. We can create crises and dramas about it, become obsessed with it. We have a personality, we have a body, we function through them. Buddhist teaching and meditation are not attempting to make us into a non-person. Their aim is not to wipe out the personality or nullify the body. The body and the personality are not the obstruction; we look after them and take care of them, they are not the problem. But if we cling to them or get possessive about them, the trouble starts.

This practice is not so much about non-engagement, it's more about learning how to pick things up when we need to pick them up and then to put them down when we need to put them down, which is the whole purpose of developing mindfulness of time and place. Loving-kindness is part of the attunement to the present moment in which we can pick things up and use them when we need to, and then put them down again. It is the discrimination that this present moment is absolutely perfect the way it is; it doesn't have to be any different.

This kind of discrimination on the basis of attunement to the present is a very important principle, because sometimes we get afraid of discriminating. In Buddhist circles, people talk about the non-discriminating mind or non-dualism. It makes dualism seem like a really negative and unwanted quality. But a bit of duality can be useful. If you want to get to San Francisco or London, you've got to choose how to get there. That would not be the time for non-dualism.

Working with this kind of non-attachment is the art of being able to pick things up at the right time and put them down at the right time or, when there's something to say, then to say it, and if there is nothing to say, then not to say anything. If we need to say something gentle and sweet, we say it. If we need to say something harsh, we say it. The discernment that chooses how to act at any given time needs to be based on that fundamental acceptance. But we have to use wisdom and attentiveness to the situation to see what's "right."

The Buddha talked about several criteria that he used to decide what to say, and when, to people. If something was true and pleasant to hear, but not beneficial, he wouldn't say it. If it was not true, he would never say it. If it was not beneficial he would never say it. Only if it was true and beneficial would he speak. Whether or not it was pleasant to hear was a secondary issue, but he'd still carefully consider it and wait for the right time to say his piece. These are really useful criteria. Having these criteria in our consciousness is very helpful when trying to decide what to say or how to communicate, how to be with others. Sometimes what we need to do or say is not welcome; people don't want to hear it. But when we know that it is true, factual, and beneficial, then we choose the right time to convey it.

The Buddha also talked about five criteria he used to give negative feedback:

1. You must speak with a heart of loving-kindness. That means that the purpose of giving feedback has to be for them, not for you. Sometimes we have to wait until we're not feeling a negative emotion, like irritation, or having the sense that if this person were different my life would be so much better, before we can talk to them.
2. You must ask permission to bring it up.
3. You must choose the right time and the place. You choose a situation where you're not going to embarrass people or make it difficult for them in public. You choose a suitable situation, sometimes on neutral ground or an easy, informal moment.
4. You have to stick to the facts of what you know to be true. You cannot make any suppositions or act on hearsay. You only speak about what you see and what you know and what the facts of the situation are.
5. You have to be free of the same fault yourself.

Just having these criteria in mind can be incredibly helpful, even if they aren't all fulfilled and we have to wait to give the feedback. We try to have these criteria in our consciousness and stay as close to them as we can. The more fully we can establish our speech from that kind of basis, the more fully we'll be able to communicate in a helpful, meaningful way. So what we say is not just a proclamation, it's a communication. Communication requires a reception as well as a transmission. It's very easy to transmit and have no receiver operating. To communicate, we need to have a receiver and a transmitter. Otherwise, the barriers will immediately

come up, and we, or the other person, won't let anything in.

The more we can establish these qualities, the more we find there's an openness in the "other" and that we can work out our difficulties. We can sort through our strained relationships and our struggles, and we can express our political opinions and take positions in terms of social change and be much more effective in the world than if we operated from sheer brute force, attacking some person or institution we're viewing as "the other" that "should be set straight." Once we've overcome that adversarial relationship and are both on the same side, we can take action together – life becomes a collaboration, rather than a contest.

Q: I like the whole thing, except for the last one where you have to be free of the same fault. For people who are not perfect, like the rest of us, if they're coming from a good place of compassion and honesty, my criteria would not be that they have to be beyond that themselves, but only have to be upfront about where they are at.

A: That's a good point. I think that if there is something you want to bring up with someone, you can preface it in a very sincere way, saying, "I know I'm not free of anger myself," and then say, "Maybe it's because I'm not free from it that I realize how painful it is, so I wanted to talk with you about those angry states that you find yourself in." You can ease into it in that way. These are guidelines, they're not rigid structures. Certainly, that way of addressing it is trying to guard against what Jesus

said about judging the speck in someone else's eye when you've got a beam, a great log, in your own.

The tendency is to find fault with others and ignore our own faults. This approach, however, is more to do with owning our own limitations; then, having owned them and acknowledged that, speaking from that position.

Q: You mentioned being mindful about if it's going to hurt somebody?

A: This is one of the criteria the Buddha described for choosing when to speak or when not to speak. There are basically three elements:

- If it is true or untrue.
- If it is pleasant to hear or unpleasant to hear.
- Whether it is useful or not useful.

The Buddha would only say something to somebody if it was true and if it was useful. Whether it was pleasant to hear or unpleasant to hear was not crucial, but he would choose the right time and situation to say something. So, if something was true and pleasant to hear, but it wasn't useful, he wouldn't say it. Or, if it was true and unpleasant to hear, but it was useful, he would pick the right time to say it.

You have to pick these principles up and chew them over. And then there is the question of how you decide when is the right time. You can't really do it by formula. In previous lessons, we talked about intuitive wisdom and the quality of listening. And you can apply the phrase from Brother David Steindl-Rast, "When you drop the question, the answer appears." So there's a deep listening

to the moment. You're not trying to figure it out by logic, but really listening to your own heart, consulting your own intuition, your feel for the moment, and letting that guide you.



LESSON

FIVE

WISDOM AND COMPASSION

The subjects for this lesson are wisdom and compassion. In the last lesson, we talked about the first of the Brahma vihāras or divine abidings, which is loving-kindness, or mettā in Pali, the language of the Buddhist scriptures. The second of these sublime qualities is karunā, which is compassion, and in many ways, compassion and wisdom are necessary counterparts.

Compassion

We tend to think of compassion as a state of empathy. Oftentimes, when we feel compassion for other people, or other beings, we experience suffering along with them. As mentioned before, the word “compassion” in English literally means “to suffer with.” In contrast, the Buddhist concept of compassion involves a profound and complete empathy, but not suffering along with the other person.

The Buddha pointed out that if you experience suffering because of your practice of compassion towards another, you haven't got it quite right. In true compassion the way it's practised in Buddhism, one feels profound empathy for the suffering of other beings, yet one is not experiencing suffering oneself. As with many areas of Buddhist practice, in the Western English-speaking Judaeo-Christian mindset there is no conceptual framework or word that quite encompasses that idea. Empathy is close, but the Buddhist concept is much more extensive than that. So, to understand compassion in the Buddhist sense, we have to describe how this quality works and then just let a sense of its meaning formulate within us.

One of the best ways of getting an insight into compassion is by using imagery from the northern Buddhist tradition, which includes Buddhism as practised in China, Japan, Tibet and Korea. A key figure in their spiritual life and practice is the figure of Quan Yin, often represented as an elegant, feminine figure. Her full name, in Chinese, is Quan Shi Yin, which literally means "the one who listens to the sounds of the world." In Sanskrit, the name is Avalokiteshvara, meaning "the one who regards the sounds of the world." So the name embodies the real spirit of what is meant by compassion in Buddhism, the listening heart that can attend to all things, that receives and takes in the beautiful as well as the ugly, the painful and the difficult. The heart is attentive to and knows, and allows all the aspects of life without reacting to them. The heart does not get swept away by the beautiful, swamped

by the painful or the ugly, carried off on a tide of tears for the pain that other beings are experiencing. The heart fully listens and attends to it all.

In Buddhist iconography, Quan Yin is the bodhisattva, the embodiment of compassion. In the Buddhist world, icons or religious statues, such as a Buddha image on a shrine, are revered. Buddhists respect Gotama Buddha as the teacher, but the point of Buddhist practice is to internalize what these images represent. If one does not internalize the qualities of these enlightened beings, the practice becomes ineffective and is missing the real point. It's not just a matter of looking at external beings or objects and idolizing them, or looking up to a compassionate ideal. The main point is to internalize the compassionate ideal and to discover that quality, the listening heart, within ourselves, to cultivate and develop that.

In a sense, this quality of compassion involves identifying with the whole universe, with all other beings, feeling that everything is self, expanding the heart to include everything. One creates an empathy or an identification with, an attunement to all things. That said, this principle may be confusing in light of the wisdom teachings, which are discussed below. With the development of wisdom, one takes the opposite approach, which is to consider that nothing is self. This apparent contradiction is true to form, for even during the Buddha's lifetime, there were people from different sects who complained, "It's impossible to get a straight answer out of the Buddha or his disciples!"

One way to hold these seeming contradictions is to see wisdom and compassion as being like the wings of a bird. We need to have both of these elements. The word “lama” in Tibetan, as in “Dalai Lama,” which means spiritual teacher or figure, illustrates this. “La” comes from the Tibetan word for wisdom, and “ma” comes from the word for compassion. These two qualities are reflected right in the very name for a teacher. The Third Zen Patriarch from China said: “In this world of suchness/There is neither self nor other than self,” thus pointing to the mysterious ineffable reality that we are. So, we can look at it from the side of compassion and say, “Everything is self! I am the universe. What I am is connected to everything in the universe – mental and physical.” We are not just isolated entities, but we are connected with all of nature, to all things through the natural order, both physical and mental.

Wisdom and Compassion Working Together

The counterpart of the idea that “everything is self” is that “nothing is self.” There is nothing one can point to that is truly and absolutely the essence of what one is as an individual. So the wisdom teachings emphasize this aspect of the nature of reality. Suppose I hold up my hand and I say, “I’m pointing to the left.” You’re facing me, and you say, “No, you’re pointing to the right.” We are both looking at the same thing, but from different perspectives. It is like the left wing and the right wing of a

bird – they are the opposites of each other, mirror images of each other, yet their shape is also identical.

Wisdom and compassion work like this. In a way, they are mirror images of each other, but they emanate from the same source. They are like the wings of a bird, which the bird needs in order to fly, and both of which emerge from the body of the bird.

The Development of Wisdom

When we talked about knowing and thinking in Lesson Three, we touched on this aspect of insight meditation practice, developing the quality of wisdom. This involves drawing upon the quality of knowing, an awareness that understands, that sees all of the patterns of experience in terms of evanescent changing phenomena.

In developing wisdom, we look at the world of thought, of feeling, of mood, of memory, of ideas; we look at the feeling of self, at the impressions of the world outside through sight, sound, smell, taste, or physical sensations. We begin to look at the process of experiencing all of these as things that are within awareness rather than focusing on the content, such as whether the object of experience is beautiful or ugly, pleasant or unpleasant. We withdraw the attention from the content of particular experiences, and, with the development of wisdom or insight, look at the very process of experience itself.

We deliberately withdraw the focus from the specific characteristics of the sense objects and look at all experience in terms of the universal characteristics of

transience, of change, of uncertainty, of selflessness, and of unsatisfactoriness. We learn to see that no aspect of our experience can truly be who and what we are – not even the sense of self, the feeling of I, me, and mine, which seems so solid and matter-of-fact, an unquestioned aspect of our everyday reality.

Where is the Owner?

When we really look, we can begin to discern that the feeling of self arises and is known by the quality of awareness in the mind. There is a feeling of self, but this feeling of “I” is just a feeling like any other feeling. It arises, it is experienced and then it fades away. What is it that knows that feeling? If what is being known is the feeling itself, who is it that’s knowing it? And who is it that knows the knowing of that? And so on:

So naturalists observe, a flea
 Has smaller fleas that on him prey;
 And these have smaller still to bite ’em,
 And so proceed *ad infinitum*.

Jonathan Swift, *Poetry*; a Rhapsody

These successions as we try to identify the knower can seem endless. We come to realize that the back wall is actually the quality of knowing itself, and not the idea of knowing. We can rest the heart in the quality of awareness and begin to see more and more of the features to which we ascribe the quality of self or other, like a thought, or a feeling, or a shape or a sound, a memory, or an idea. One cannot actually find any quality of permanence or stability

or individuality within any of these. All the things we normally think of as me and mine – my possessions, my name, my social security number, my story, my future, my body, my thoughts, my emotions, etc. – when we try to look for the thing that is the owner, we cannot find any separate definable substance, quality, or located factor that is the owner. There is the knowing and the parade of experiences out of which we form “me,” “the world,” “you” – these different conventional realities.

When we investigate, we can see that the feeling of solidity that the sense of self possesses is something that has a conventional reality. There is a partial truth to it, but we solidify it and say, for example, “I am this person. Everyone tells me that I am this person, when they call my name and are referring to me,” and then we feel that this is what we are in essence, truly.

An interesting meditation is to just meditate on one’s own name. Concentrate and calm the mind, focus the attention and then just say your name, very clearly and steadily, just once or twice, without even saying “I am...” first, just the name, like, “Mary,” “Amaro.” Suddenly, the name starts to seem a little peculiar. We begin to see that the thing to which we refer is much bigger than the collection of personality, the body, the memories and ideas that we habitually think of as “me.”

With the wisdom teachings, we are trying to break down the habitual limitations that are created and imposed on the idea of “me” – that we are this individual, live in this place, are this body, this personality, etc. We

let the heart awaken to the reality that is much bigger than that, much more than that.

Staying Balanced

If one obsesses on the wisdom teachings, one can get a bit too spacious and disconnected from the world, from the body, from the simple practical realities of living. On the other hand, obsessing too much on the compassion side can make us incredibly busy and burnt out with all of the good works that we're involved in and with caring for all beings on the planet.

So, even though it can seem paradoxical to hold them both simultaneously, it is important to keep in mind that we need to do just that; the two qualities support each other, even though they are each other's mirror images. To the rational mind, this can be highly frustrating – we want to know which one is true and can't quite believe that they both can be. But this is the wonderful thing about the Middle Way: it encompasses both of these aspects as partial or conventional realities, as contingent or determined realities.

Compassion and Listening

Once you have established a degree of concentration, with the attention able to stay reasonably steady in the present moment, you will notice a certain amount of chattering in the mind. This is an internal monologue, dialogue, multi-logue, in which the members of the internal committee do not wait for each other to finish before they chime in with

their own views and opinions and chatter merrily away. As we train the mind to concentrate, we find different inner voices coming up, such as voices of excitement (“What I really want is...”), or voices of criticism (“She’s a really useless person”), or voices of anger (“When I get my hands on him, I’m going to tell him!”), or voices of regret (“If I hadn’t done such-and-such, back when I was 19, it would all have been really, really different; if I hadn’t done that one really dumb thing; if I could just re-write the past...”).

As an example, for probably the first five or six years of my monastic life, I spent incredible amounts of time scripting the future. I stopped because, after five or six years of watching this happen, I realized that not one single time did reality comply with my plans. At times I would very determinedly follow my script – even when the other actors didn’t get their lines right, I would continue with the script that I had written. But after five or six years of seeing that this relentless planning never worked, something in the heart shifted and just gave this strategy up – perhaps it was a version of the law of natural selection!

Working with the Internal Committee

On a very personal and internal level, by practising compassion and wisdom, we learn how to listen to our own minds, to the voices of the internal committee. This committee has a great variety of opinions and voices: the assertive-aggressive ones, the logical-reasonable ones,

the emotional-feeling ones, the quiet-sensible ones, the passive-aggressive ones, the outright wild ones. We can effectively ground the practice of compassion for ourselves in learning to listen to all the different voices of our character as they arise.

Often, we try to get the internal voices to just be quiet. However, we find, generally, the more we try to suppress them or push them away, the more life we give them. Pesticides are a good analogy. Pesticide manufacturers are usually about one year or 18-months ahead of the bugs. They have to keep developing new poisons, because the bugs with resistance to the pesticide survive, so in effect the pesticide manufacturers are breeding super bugs! The mind is exactly the same. If we use mental pesticide to try to make our issues go away, we just keep making the problem stronger.

Rather than pushing away the repetitive thoughts and habitual voices of the mind, the judgements, or the things that are seen as irritating intruders, we get can them to speak up, to take centre stage and tell their story. That gesture itself can be enough to make the voices quiet down. By giving them centre stage, we ruin the show. With all the bright lights on, we can see all the wrinkles and the strings that are pulling them.

For example, the thought “I’m a terrible meditator” murmurs in the back of the mind. We concentrate the mind, make it quite clear and steady, and then say, “I am a failed meditator. I am useless at this. This has no value whatsoever. Other people are good meditators. I go to retreats, to classes. But everyone is much more peaceful

than me.” In saying this and making it conscious, we become aware that the heart knows this is not the whole story. But when it is not fully conscious and clear, we can still believe it and be guided and influenced by that belief. Even though the mind might be saying something we don’t want to hear, by saying it out loud, we can hear it most clearly, and its power over us diminishes. This is only one example; there can be many things the mind obsesses on. Self-criticism is just a particularly common one.

One of my teachers, Ajahn Sumedho, often referred to an obsessive thought he had in his first year as a novice monk, when he was living in a hut by himself for a year in northeast Thailand. Out of nowhere, he had the thought, “Gwendolyn, what are you to me?” Then he thought, “Gwendolyn? I don’t know any Gwendolyns. I’ve never met a Gwendolyn in my life! That’s just a stupid thought – get out of here!” Then the thought, “Gwendolyn, what are you to me?” came back. The more he tried to push this thought away, the more it kept returning. He had to learn a lot about obsessive thinking and this method of reflection. Eventually he found that only by acknowledging the thought fully was he able to release it and allow it to fade on its own.

Watching the Mind Create the Sense of Self

In these ways, the mind creates a sense of self. We can use this technique of expressing and acknowledging our thoughts, instead of repressing them, to become fully aware of them. We may experience the flip-side of the

self-criticism example described above and think, “As meditators go, as spiritual people go, I really have to admit that I am ahead of pretty much everyone I know.” For most of us, it’s almost impossible to imagine having this thought. But for those who are prone to becoming arrogant and inflated, by mentally expressing these thoughts clearly, the heart realizes that they are no more the whole story than the self-criticism is.

Without articulating these thoughts, the heart cannot know the reality. Without learning to listen, one does not really tap into the heart. By developing this kind of direct compassion and by listening to thoughts, judgments and obsessions, one can tap into the intuition underneath the habitual beliefs and judgments.

The wisdom aspect of the meditation, which was touched on in Lesson Three, empowers this process of looking at every thought and every feeling. When a thought comes to mind, one can apply and develop wisdom by noticing that these thoughts are ephemeral, changing, and selfless. One uses insight to then reflect, “This is something that is changing,” “Who does this really belong to? Does this have an owner?”

For example, the feeling of pain in the leg arises. We sense the feeling and then, by watching it, realize through its arising, changing and passing that feelings come and go and change. We notice the qualities of the feeling, such as a cramped or strained quality. We inquire as to what it is that knows that; we look to see if the feeling has an owner, if it is really “mine.” If it feels like “mine,” what is the quality that makes it mine? What is it that

is the owner? In meditation, we take these little lines of inquiry slowly and steadily and watch the effect of this investigation. Calling the feeling “the experience of pain” creates some space around it that wasn’t there before. Knowing that it’s just a feeling of pain is what is meant by insight or wisdom; we recognize the spacious natural quality that all experience has.

Letting Go of the Sense of I, Me and Mine

One goal of Buddhist practice is to let go of the sense of I, me and mine in relationship to experience, as the possessor of experience – the sense of a concrete self having the experience. In meditation, we dig layer by layer to uncover the attributes which we assume without question are “mine,” such as “my” memories, “my” ideas, “my” personality, “my” heart. We go right down into the nitty-gritty, into the deepest reaches, and keep dropping in the gentle reflection: “When I say ‘my,’ what does that mean? Does this really have an owner? Who is it that owns this?” With these kind of questions we do not look for a verbal answer, an answer provided by our conceptual mind. In fact, if there is a verbal answer, it’s necessarily the wrong one.

We ask a question like, “What is it that knows this?” to deconstruct the habitual response: “Me.” Posing that kind of question in the spaciousness of awareness allows the heart for a moment to know that there is just the knowing. There is not really a person or an individual who is doing the knowing. The awareness is a formless quality

of being. We ask the question, or make the statement, to break down the habitual response. The point is then just to let the heart rest in that quality of knowing. This way we draw together the aspect of compassion – which allows everything in and listens to all the different attributes of our being and of the world – and the wisdom aspect, which is what sees through them. This is what brings us to the sacred, wonderful middle.



GUIDED MEDITATION

FIVE

Relax the body

Begin by taking a moment to bring the attention into the posture and let the body settle down. Allow the spine to stretch, to lengthen to a comfortable upright position. Let the rest of the body relax completely around the spine. Give yourself permission to be at ease – to settle.

Let the whole body relax... the muscles of the face and the shoulders... the stomach... wherever in the body you find any kind of tension. Consciously let yourself soften.

Bring Attention to the Breath

Bring the attention to the feeling of the breath, not trying to change it in any way, just feeling the body breathing in its natural rhythm. Let the sensation of the breath be a central marker, a focal point, for your attention. Just follow the breath as fully as you can, following each inhalation... each exhalation.

Notice Distraction in the Mind

The mind's tendency is towards distraction. Its habit is to grab hold of a sound or a feeling or an idea and create a whole

story out of it... to run with it. As you notice this happening, whenever you find the mind has run away, has become caught up and distracted, train yourself to notice that, to awaken to the feeling of distraction and then to consciously let go, to release what the mind has grabbed hold of and to return to the present moment, marked by the feeling of the breath.

Cultivate a Receptive Mind and Heart

If you find the mind launching into a train of ideas, into a story, and it won't let go, cultivate the quality of just listening to what the mind is saying. Rather than trying to push it aside, consciously bring it into the centre of the attention. Let it have its say. Start out by saying, "What I want is..." "What I fear is..." "The way it should be is..." As the distraction comes up, consciously spell it out... listen to it... allow it in. Listen with a tender, receptive heart. Take it in. Know it. Let it go.

You may find yourself thinking, as you listen to the story, that you could be explaining it better. As you finish phrasing that statement, let the out-breath carry it away. Let the heart return to silence.

Whatever the thought might be, whether it's something personal or the sorrows of the world, the wars and terrible conflicts that come to mind and well up within the heart, just notice the heart surging after a feeling, an idea, an image. Use this way of listening by allowing it into the heart. Give it voice. Articulate what is going on. In the act of expressing it, of claiming it, see the way it's transformed... notice what happens when you do that.

Apply the Wisdom/Insight Element

If the mind is steady and stable enough, reflect on whatever you experience in the way of perception... what you hear, what you feel in the body, whatever thoughts arise... whatever it might be. Reflect on all of it, the whole array.

As you let go of the obsession with the content, deepen and fill out the quality of wisdom by saying or reflecting: “This is uncertain, transient, unsatisfactory. Who does this moment belong to? Is there an owner?” Arouse this quality of knowing... of investigation... of wisdom. Not to try to figure everything out, but to help the heart more and more fully to rest in the spacious welcoming of openhearted awareness, being that openhearted awareness. Welcome everything in. Gather everything in. Embrace everything, without being possessive. Let go of everything. See the transparency of all things.

Reflect in this way to help loosen the presumptions we make about ego and self. You can do that in meditation by thinking of your own name. Just listen and attend to the response of the heart that knows the transparency of the ego and self.

Like suddenly seeing through something that was thought to be opaque... seeing its transparency. Let the heart rest in that greater spaciousness, in that brightness.

End of Meditation

QUESTION AND ANSWER

FIVE

Ajahn Sundara, a senior nun of the Ajahn Chah Thai forest monastery lineage, was present at this teaching and answered some of the questions.

Q: What is your experience of “heart”? How do you experience it?

A [Ajahn Sundara]: In Buddhism, the words “mind” and “heart” are used interchangeably. If you ask a Westerner where the heart is, he or she will point to the chest and say it is there. So we think the heart is here and the mind is here [pointing to the head]. So what do you mean by heart?

Q: I asked because I don’t know.

A [Ajahn Sundara]: The heart (*citta*) in Buddhism is everything that you experience in any given moment. The heart is not defined as being emotional or non-emotional, rational or non-rational. It represents the totality of your experience at this very moment. Sometimes your heart may feel closed when you are disconnected, and open when you are connected – when you are out of the way. Other times, you may feel very tight and closed when

you are clinging to “me” and “mine.” The experience of having a closed heart is often connected with a sense of grasping, fear, wanting, with the kind of thought patterns in the mind that reduce your connection with the world. What makes your heart open is when you are not limiting yourself with self-absorbed thoughts, or identifying with your feelings or with your body. When you stop identifying with those, then you’ll find your heart is much more open.

Often we think of the heart as an emotional experience: “I feel,” or “My heart is broken,” or “I have a happy heart.” We seem to think the heart is where we feel things. People may wonder where the heart is in Buddhism because the teachings are presented in a cool and rational way and the path of practice is often described as the cooling down of our mental defilements. But the heart experience of each moment is not limited to the physical heart or to a place in the body. It is also not limited to a particular experience such as when you felt compassionate and you were “in the heart,” or you felt wretched and you were not “in the heart.” In Buddhism, both experiences are equally in the heart. Whether you feel mean, selfish and stupid, or whether you feel clever, compassionate and generous, whatever feeling you have, the important thing to remember is that this feeling is not dissociated from what we call the heart – the *citta* in Pali. *Citta* can be thought of as “mind/heart.” and it encompasses all that we think of in our language as the mind and the heart.

Q: What is an empty heart? An open or closed heart?

A [Ajahn Sundara]: The concepts of closed or open don't apply so exclusively. If you feel your heart is closed, it may be that you are lost in self concerns. But it doesn't mean that your heart is closed, really. It seems to be closed, but the heart is always here, always present; it's neither closed nor open.

Sometimes you feel the heart, and sometimes you don't feel it. It's just the way it appears. Your experience of this room right now is like the heart; it isn't really closed or open. Maybe you look at Ajahn Amaro, and you forget about the room. But the room is still here. In the same way, what we're describing as the heart experience is much bigger than an emotional experience, or one that is located in the middle of your chest or the solar plexus that feels and senses. It's a much broader experience in this tradition.

A [Ajahn Amaro]: When you say "an empty heart is an open heart," it's referring to being empty of the solid feeling of self. As Ajahn Sundara was saying, when the feeling of self is not imputed as a solid, absolute reality separate from other things, there is an innate fullness and openness. The infinite nature of the heart is then more visible.

As Ajahn Sundara was speaking, I remembered a saying by a Christian mystic named Angelus Silesius, who said, "God only comes to visit when we're not at home." When "I" am out, then God comes to visit. You don't want to make the ego into the big villain or banish the ego

altogether. The point is just not to give it control. Letting the ego run your life is rather like handing the wheel of your car to a 3-year-old. If we let the sense of self run our lives, there's going to be trouble.

Q: When you said that when we explore, there's going to be a knower of the known, and then a knower of the knower – were you saying that seriously?

A [Ajahn Amaro]: Well, in jest, really, because when we look at it logically, that's what we think. But experientially what happens is that you realize this is the back wall, where the knowing actually happens.

For example, say there's a moment of clear knowing. Then the thought arises, "Oh, wow. Here's a moment of clear knowing." You just left the back wall, because there was a thought and then the attention got lost in the thought. So in asking, "What is it that's knowing?" you step back, and then you realize that you just stepped back, and so on. So this is the knowing that's knowing the knowing. If the mind grabs the idea of that, then you just drifted away from the back wall again. As you're drifting away and coming back to the same place, you might interpret it, as in the poem I mentioned before, "Great fleas have little fleas and so *ad infinitum*." But it's actually the case that when we are being that genuine quality of knowing, that is the back wall. You can't get behind that. This brings to mind a poem by a student at Cambridge who wrote:

The was a young man who said, “Though
 It appears that I know that I know,
 What I’d like to see
 Is the ‘I’ that knows me
 When I know that I know that I know.”

Q: Could you talk a little bit about compassion in action? A meditation teacher once described being on retreat and sitting in the dining room and noting that someone was coughing and then that they were choking... choking... choking. And then, “Oh my God, she’s choking!” I’m a little confused. Ajahn Amaro was explaining attachment, letting go of the I, me, and mine. But at what point do we say, “Okay. This is a mess. I have to go deal with it,”?

A [Ajahn Sundara]: Ajahn Chah used to give this great teaching that if you let go a little, you have a little peace; if you let go a lot, you have a lot of peace, and if you let go completely, then you will have complete peace. One day, he was walking around the monastery and saw that one of his disciples’ meditation hut had a hole in the roof. Eventually the roof collapsed. The disciple, who lived in this hut, was faithfully letting go. This is what Ajahn Chah would call “mindfulness without wisdom.” Maybe the idea of letting go is there, but wisdom is not being applied to the situation.

Wisdom is the response of the here and now. If it is really a true response, then it’s a compassionate response and in harmony with the moment, in harmony with the way things are. This means you are doing what you’re supposed to be doing. If the house is on fire, you don’t say,

“Let’s all let go. We all need to die one day. Never mind. The house is just on fire. Let’s stay here, this is going to pass.” That is stupidity.

So, relating to your question about compassion, actually the two occur together – compassion with wisdom. It’s just one response to life. But you go through all these phases as a meditator. I think you have to appreciate the humanity of those phases because it is a very funny relationship you enter with yourself. You have the person in you that is clinging, grasping, screaming, and then you have the self that actually knows you should be letting go. And then you have the self that thinks that it really doesn’t matter. And then you have the self that says, “What actually does matter? Because if that person’s choking, I’ve got to do something – or she’ll die.” There will be mindfulness and the wisdom – the factors of wisdom and compassion – and so on. So you have all these different selves that are on the journey.

You intend to be a really good meditator, but when you merely note, “choking, choking, choking, choking” that’s actually entering a belief system, which is exactly what the Buddha was teaching us to understand and drop, not perpetuate that belief system. The mind can believe these things. You believe you have to “be mindful.” It’s not truly being mindful – it’s still that belief in the mind that’s holding to an idea of how things should be. “So, I’m going to be mindful of my mind as it is. Okay... sound... sound... sound. Choking... choking... choking.” And then suddenly the wisdom appears, “Oh my God. There’s a human being here who’s choking. Oh, I’ve got to take her

to the hospital, maybe. Maybe she'll die." So the wisdom is suddenly taking over and seeing things as they are and what needs to be done!

Compassionate action is an immediate response that comes when you drop away all personal agendas without concerns for your personal comfort. A lot of our compassion or so-called compassionate response can be motivated by many other things. That's why we can feel very confused. Are we being compassionate or just doing something to feel good? Or, are we doing something because everybody else thinks it's going to be a good thing to do? So, all these agendas behind our motivation can be confusing for us. We don't know which one is which.

In terms of the world being a mess out there, what do you do? Often we want to be omnipotent, the one who can solve everybody's problems. There is very much a desire – consciously or subconsciously – to be omnipotent, to be able to solve everything. And we feel really disappointed with ourselves when we can't. I have a friend who was telling me recently about a bird hospital that was nearly going bankrupt and she was concerned about their welfare. When I visited this person, she told me that a check had just come for \$350,000. I said, " Good lord, those birds have a lot of spiritual perfections! They must have done something really good to find somebody who can give them so much money just to support them in their little journey on this earth." So what can you do to help? You do what you can.

I feel that where you have to start is here in your heart, and not just as an idea. Many things bring us to the

heart, perhaps someone you meet, or caring for an elderly person, or being aware of suffering in your heart and in the world. But if your heart doesn't have compassion for your mind and body, then you won't really be in tune with what's happening. It's like the person that sees that somebody is depressed and who wants to be compassionate to this person so they say, "Come on! Cheer up! Look at the world: it's so beautiful! Look at the butterflies and the birds. It's springtime and sunny and wonderful today!" Well, their intention is good, but it's not a compassionate response for this person who might just want some empathy, maybe somebody holding their hand – turning to them and saying, "Gee, you feel really terrible today, don't you?"

A [Ajahn Amaro]: C.S. Lewis is a Christian theologian who once wrote something like: "Charity is one of the most significant and central virtues of the Christian faith, and those who are in receipt of the charity often have about them the look of the hunted."

That is so true. We can exercise our own egoic needs helping others because we feel good if we help somebody else, but actually that other person can easily just be a pawn fulfilling our need to feel good. That's why when I was contemplating what to do in terms of teaching about compassion, I thought the most helpful thing was the exercise of learning to listen to our own minds, because in a way that's at the very root of it.

As Ajahn Sundara was saying, if you're trying to do good things or if you act compassionately but it's coming from an idealistic place, rather from of a place of attunement to

reality and a real listening to the whole situation, you're always going to be slightly out of synch. You're going to be driven by those various layers of motivation: "If there's still a suffering being in the world, it's my fault." Has anyone been in the situation where someone says to you, "I'm suffering and it's your fault!" Or have we ourselves said to other people, "I'm suffering and it's your fault that I'm suffering"? It does happen.

So what Ajahn Sundara is saying is really perfect, because there's a Judaeo-Christian inheritance that encourages us to be good-hearted, tender-hearted and to be of assistance. However, we experience the fact that we can't help everybody as a sense of lack - "I haven't done enough," "I could do more," "I should do more" - even though we've done wonderful things. I know dozens of people that have done incredible things with their lives, but still feel like they didn't do enough. They have created a negative self-image rather than being able to celebrate and rejoice in the good that they have done.

My own experience of going to Thailand and entering into a Buddhist environment was my first experience of people being content to just do what they could and not feeling that anything was missing. I remember when I first encountered that, I was astonished. I'd never seen that in my life. I was a "do-gooder" kind of person, and it was just assumed that you could never do enough, and if you could do more you would. That would be better.

The interesting concept is that just to do what we can do and then leave it alone is not necessarily worse, but may be the wisest thing. This is where wisdom and

compassion really fuse with each other, when I know that nothing is missing because I couldn't save every bird with a broken wing, or every underfed child on the planet. It's a wonderful quality to be able to say, "Okay, I did what I could," and to be glad of that and then to leave the rest alone. You're not glad that other people are suffering and they're not being helped, but you're not taking it as a personal failing. Sometimes when people have said to you that they are suffering and it's your fault, they might be right. But probably a lot of their suffering is due to the way they're handling it themselves, or other contingent factors; you're just a convenient target. You walked in the room at the wrong moment.

You can never prejudge any situation. Each situation fluctuates, moment-by-moment. So it's really about drawing into the heart and listening with intuitive wisdom, asking: How do I receive this? What is behind this? How real is this? And then the response can be to do something, to take action, to get out there and fix things. Or the response can be the other extreme, that there's nothing to be done here; nothing can be said or done, so leaving it alone is the kindest and wisest thing. But you can't figure that out ahead of time. You can only attune the heart to the situation and be guided by that.

A [Ajahn Sundara]: This reminds me of an experience I had a while ago when I could hear in my mind a kind of righteous voice, that sounded totally right and true. It was very interesting to be aware of that voice saying, "Yes, I've got these arguments, number one, number two, and number three that are absolutely right to prove my point."

But there was another part of me that knew better which was saying, “Yes, but that won’t work. These arguments have a tinge of violence in them, like ‘I’m going to cut you into one, and two, and three pieces with my arguments.’” On one level, of course, my arguments sounded just right and true, and wise, and compassionate. On another level, I knew that those arguments were not in tune with what I really wanted to convey when I spoke to that person. I just had to let go and say, “No. Even though I’ve got things I could say that seem absolutely right and would perfectly prove my point, I can’t use them because when it comes to this situation, that approach would be unskilful.”

A [Ajahn Amaro]: As Ajahn Chah once said, “It would have been right in fact but wrong in Dhamma,” and that’s the factor that makes all the difference in the world.



LESSON

SIX

HURDLES AND PITFALLS

The theme of this lesson is Hurdles and Pitfalls. This might sound like now we'll hear all the bad news – we're finished with the good stuff, and now we'll hear all about the difficulties and the headaches that come with trying to practise meditation. But in order for our practice to progress, it's essential to know about some of the difficulties that might arise and the methods we can develop and use to counteract them. So, the purpose of this chapter is to assist us in making our practice more effective and useful, and to enable us to integrate these themes of meditation so that we can live more peacefully and joyfully and with greater understanding.

Previous Themes

The main themes examined in the previous lessons have been:

- Establishing the quality of concentration and focus,
- Developing insight and wisdom,
- Cultivating loving-kindness,
- Understanding how wisdom relates to compassion,
- Practising contemplation and reflection, and
- Examining how these different elements all fit together.

These lessons have covered a broad range of essential elements of Buddhist meditation. The aim of this final lesson is to identify the kind of difficulties we might encounter while training in these aspects of meditation.

Commonality of Difficulties

The concept of meditation crosses religious boundaries. When Buddhists discuss meditation or contemplative prayer with Christians, for example, and mention these themes, everyone starts nodding in agreement. Everyone, no matter what their religious background is, has trouble with either keeping the chattering mind from taking over the entire show, or with falling asleep and missing the whole thing. This was illustrated at the ordination ceremony of a young man in our monastic community. His sister had been a nun in a Hindu tradition for about 10 years; she wore very dramatic bright orange robes and a really spiffy turban. Everyone thought she was a really serious yogi. Halfway through the ceremony, people started noticing her nodding off, and realized that Buddhists and Hindus have a great deal in common. Hindu

dullness is not very different from Buddhist dullness. All paths lead up the same mountain, as they say...

Five Standard Obstacles

The Buddhist scriptures mention five standard obstacles, hurdles and pitfalls that we are likely to encounter in meditation.

Sense Desire (*Kāmacchanda*)

The first obstacle is sense desire, which is described as the mind hungering for pleasure. For example, we sit down to meditate and, rather than the mind staying on the appointed meditation object, we hear a sound, like a piece of music playing from a building nearby, and the mind gets enraptured by the music. Or perhaps there is no music actually playing, so we conjure up some of our own and start singing songs to ourselves. Or maybe we are hungry – oftentimes on meditation retreats there are specific disciplines in terms of food and mealtimes, so there is no supper in the evening. My teacher, Ajahn Chah, said that when he was a novice in the monastery in northeast Thailand, he would visualize Chinese noodles – hallucinate noodles. His imagination was so strong, he could taste them going into his mouth, feel them sliding across his tongue. Or he could smell these little fruits they have in Thailand called “fragrant bananas,” *gluey hom*. Sitting in the meditation hall, his mouth would be pouring with saliva, and he could smell them, taste them, feel them on his tongue. It was just the hungering of the

body for something to eat, and Ajahn Chah fantasizing, “Wouldn’t it be marvelous to have a fragrant banana.” What he wouldn’t have done for a bowl of Chinese noodles!

This exemplifies the obstacle of sense desire. The mind is drawn by the appeal of a sound, or smell, or taste; a thought or a passion.

As another example, before the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas monastery in Ukiah, California, opened, the monastics lived in another monastery in San Francisco’s Mission District in an old mattress factory. One of the novice monks had been in the U.S. Navy, and he was a big strapping guy. They had a strict, one-meal-a-day rule. Because he was a novice monk, he could still use money. Every so often, because the monastery could not satisfy his desire for food, he would go to the neighborhood pie shop. One day he went to the pie shop and gorged himself on many pies. After he was full, there was still one pie left for which he didn’t have room, no matter how hard he tried. So he stashed the pie in his bag and went back to the monastery. Even though he’d stuffed himself and couldn’t imagine ever being hungry again, at around 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon, the familiar rumbling in his stomach started, and the next thing he knew he was fantasizing about this pie. They kept a very strict discipline in that monastery, and it was totally forbidden to eat anything in the evening. But all through the evening meditation and the Master’s Dharma talk, he kept thinking, “The pie... the pie... I’ve got a really juicy berry pie in my bag.” That pie was burning a hole in his bag. Finally, as one does sometimes on these occasions, he thought, “I don’t care

what the karmic result of this is. I can't stand it. This is too much to bear. I'm just going to do it."

He planned it all out and, after everyone had retired for the evening, he went up the fire escape, onto the roof of the monastery. He settled himself down behind the chimney stack and got the pie out of his bag. He took one mouthful and thought, "Ahhh ... this is nirvana... this is absolute total bliss... this is really worth it!" Then he heard the sound of feet on the fire escape. He thought, "It's ten o'clock at night. No one comes up on the roof at night-time. Quick! Do something!" So he started pretending that he was doing walking meditation around the top of the building, very diligently and very dignified, in an austere manner. Over the parapet, Master Hua appeared, the abbot of the monastery. He came up the fire escape and, mimicking the exact same posture as the novice, he started doing walking meditation in the opposite direction. The novice kept his eyes down on the ground, and the master walked past him once, twice, in exactly the same posture, diligent, ardent, focused completely on the meditation. By this time the novice's heart was beating about 200 times per minute and he was pouring with sweat. Finally, on the third round, as they passed each other, the master stopped, looked him in the eye and said, "How does it feel?" He gave the novice a big smile, and said, "Eat your pie!" And they both laughed, and Master Hua walked off and left the novice in peace.

The Buddha used a number of analogies to describe these obstacles or obstructions. In one, he described them in terms of water. Sense desire is similar to water with

dye in it, when the water has been coloured red or green or blue. The clear water of the mind has an added pigment in it. It has been coloured – changed from its original state. The Buddha also used an analogy of being in debt, when the mind is caught up in a state of sense desire it's like being in debt.

We can free the heart from sense desires. We can say to ourselves, “I know that pie is burning a hole in my bag, but I could probably survive the night if I didn't eat it,” or, “Certainly I will feel a lot happier if I resist this desire, if I let go of this desire rather than pursue it.” We can experience the moment of letting go, of recognizing the desire but choosing not to be drawn in. We can recognize the painful or embarrassing result of following it. Then we can break free of the thrall or the pull of the desire. The Buddha said that having this quality of relief is like being free of debt, the heart having let go of the pull towards a sense desire.

Negativity, Aversion, Ill-will (*Vyāpāda*)

The next obstacle is negativity or aversion, ill-will. For example, music is playing in the house next door, and it's really irritating you, and you wish it would stop. You think of all the things you're going to do to the neighbours to force them to stop annoying you, because you're trying to meditate – and you know all the terrible karma they're creating by interrupting your spiritual life. So you create a whole diatribe of negativity as a result of hearing the sound.

In an earlier lesson, I told the story of Ajahn Chah visiting the little monastery in London in the heat of summer, with the music playing. The first thing Ajahn Chah said to the meditators when he rang the bell to end the meditation was: “You think that the sound is annoying you, but actually it’s you that’s annoying the sound! The sound is just what it is. It’s not there trying to upset you; it’s just doing what sound is supposed to do. If there is annoyance, it is only coming from you.”

The mind moves easily into ill-will and negativity towards external objects or pain in the body. It seems natural and reasonable to resent the pain in the knee that comes with trying to sit on the floor for more than ten minutes. The mind then produces a train of thoughts like, “If only I didn’t have that pain in my knee, I would be happy.” “If only I could get rid of this obsessive thought, I’d never ask for anything else ever again. I’ve got to stop thinking this ridiculous thought.” “I’d be happy if I could stop thinking of that irritating pop song, if I could get rid of that terrible tune.”

Oftentimes on a meditation retreat, the mind obsessively churns over something we do not even like. Joseph Goldstein, a well-known American meditation teacher, tells the story of being on a solitary retreat in a cabin by a stream one time, and he became obsessed with the way the stream seemed to be playing “The Star Spangled Banner.” He actually went out to the stream and rearranged the rocks so it would stop playing that aggravating tune.

But the problem is usually not the rocks. Most of the time, it is the mind that is the problem. When speaking of this quality of aversion and negativity, the Buddha used the analogy of water that is boiling, that is heated and bubbling. He also compared it to being in a state of sickness or disease. When we see the aversion in the mind, to the neighbour's loud music, for example, we can then recognize that the sound is just a sound. We can recognize that if I put that music on, I enjoy it; when the neighbour puts it on, it "ruins my meditation." We can analyze the situation in this way and see that the mind is just creating a problem when there really isn't one.

In the same way, we can recognize the tension and fear and aversion towards physical pain and then relax the body and the attitude towards the pain. We realize that we can let go of the negativity and just let the pain be the pain, recognize it as a sensation, rather than making it a big problem or imagining it will lead to a trip to the emergency room. We can leave it alone and relax with it, allow it to be the way it is. When that happens, the actual level of pain diminishes rapidly and, even though it might still feel uncomfortable, it's no longer a problem. We can let go of the aversion and, instead, experience that feeling of relief.

Sloth and Torpor (*Thīna-middha*)

The next of the obstructions and hindrances to meditation is known in Buddhist jargon as "sloth and torpor." This refers to a dull, heavy, not-quite-asleep-but-not-

quite-awake state of mind which often arises when one practises meditation.

In the beginning of our practice, the mind is often busy and agitated and bouncing around all over the place, and the body is tense and uncomfortable. The mind feels very alert simply because of this level of agitation; it's in a very keen state, or very aroused. After a while, when we have trained the mind to focus a bit and the body gets used to sitting in a cross-legged posture, the mind and body calm down somewhat. The arousing, painful, stimulating influence abates. Then the mind shifts into this other mode, because we rarely experience anything between full speed ahead or dead stop. "Feeling alert" means we're excited, frightened, or irritated. "Feeling peaceful" means we're zoned out, not feeling anything, switched off. We don't know how to be alert and peaceful at the same time.

Dullness is especially problematic in meditation because we are often so dull and sleepy that we can't apply the antidotes; there is usually not enough sharpness even to think of how to work with that state of mind when we are experiencing it. This state of mind can also trick us, as it can be very peaceful, and we are fooled into thinking we are meditating well. When I was a new novice in the monastery in Thailand I thought my meditation was much better in the morning. In the evening, I was always in a lot of pain and being eaten by the mosquitoes. It was very uncomfortable, and it felt like the sittings went on for hours. In the mornings, my meditation was so much

better, and it went by in a flash. But another novice pointed out to me that I was fast asleep, with my head halfway down to the floor, semi-conscious. So this dullness can be deceptive; we can feel like we're meditating really well, feeling so peaceful, but really be falling asleep.

Sleepiness comes in waves, and the trick is to catch it at the first wave. One way to do this, as mentioned in the Questions of Lesson Two, is to hold an object, a matchstick for example, in your hands, between your thumbs. As soon as your mind starts to get dull, the fingers start to relax, and the matchstick will fall into your hands. The first wave has arrived. At that point, open your eyes and straighten the spine. Usually, another wave will come right after, and the eyes will start to blur and the body will start to droop. If you can resist and not give in to the sleepiness, after maybe one or two more little waves, it will disappear. Another technique involves using your visual perception. Open your eyes and focus on a candle flame or another object in front of you. As soon as the vision starts to blur or to separate, you know you're falling asleep, and when this happens, refocus the eyes until the visual image is sharp-edged once again.

There are many other tricks you can try, liking taking a match box or a book and putting it on your head. As you start to nod, it drops off. This works well if you're sitting with a group of other people. You don't want to look bad in front of others, so you use vanity and pride to counteract dullness. This might be offsetting one problem with

another but, nevertheless, it is a very effective technique to use with dullness.

For a mind overtaken by dullness, the Buddha used the analogy of water covered with a layer of algae and pond-weed, scummy water that is sludgy, impenetrable to the eye. He also compared it to being in prison. When the mind is free from dullness, when we have broken through it or learned how to prevent it from taking root, it is like clearing the waters of that scum or being released from prison.

Restlessness (*Uddhacca-kukkucca*)

The next hindrance, which is the opposite of dullness, is restlessness, agitation, fretting – the agitated, restless, worrying, fidgeting mind, characterized by too much energy, which causes the body to be out of balance. In describing this, the Buddha used the analogy of water being blown by the wind or stirred up and agitated. He also used the analogy of being enslaved; when one is free from restlessness, it is like being freed from the state of slavery, from the state in which one is subject to the demands of another.

The main antidote for restlessness is to bring the attention into the body, particularly using the kind of body sweeping described in the guided meditations in earlier lessons in which one relaxes each part of the body in turn. We can also use the breath, particularly the out-breath, to help relax the body and calm the stirred-up, agitated, turbulent quality. But this technique is not just

used for physical restlessness. Continually coming back to the breath, calming and relaxing the body, is a good way of dealing with mental restlessness as well, with the agitated, restless quality of the mind. Ajahn Chah would also recommend going out and doing walking meditation, walking as quickly as one can, even to the point of exhausting oneself physically, to burn off a lot of the energy. As with dullness, there are many cures and ways to work with this.

Doubt (*Vicikicchā*)

The last of these classic hurdles and pitfalls is the quality of doubt, the mind caught in uncertainty. This is not the uncertainty of wise reflection on the transitory and unstable nature of all things. Rather, the type of doubt that is a pitfall in meditation leads to questions like, “What should I do next? Should I move now? Should I not move now? Who am I? What am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What shall I have for supper? Should I change my career? Should I change my partner? Should I change the wallpaper? Should I dye my hair? Change my glasses? Should I stop asking myself stupid questions? What should I do to get rid of this doubt?” Doubt is present when the mind caught in endless questioning and speculating and indecision, the state in which we’re caught in endless dilemmas.

When doubt takes over we think incessantly, attempting to think our way out of the doubt. Doubt is

like a courtroom battle: No matter how much evidence is built up on one side, the lawyers will always come up with an argument to counteract it, because that's what lawyers are paid to do. Even when a judgment is handed down and the case is finally decided, one side appeals and it all begins again. After that, the case can be taken to a higher court, and a higher court, and a higher court. In a similar way, the doubting mind will always pile up evidence. The fact is, we can't analyze our way to the end of the doubt.

The best way to deal with doubt, to get the mind to drop the endless speculating and uncertainty, is to step out of the doubt; in essence we simply recognize, "This is a state of doubt." The voice of doubt tells us that there is something missing, that when we get the answer to the question, we will be complete. Just like the belief that when we get rid of this pain in the knee, we will certainly be happy; when we get hold of some Chinese noodles, we will be happy; when we remember the words to the song, we will be happy. But it's not true. Rather than believing in the story of it, the falsehood of it, one simply recognizes, "This is just a doubt." Our experience is complete in and of itself. Doubt is telling us that there's a piece missing, but the actual reality is fully complete already. How could there truly be anything missing from the universe in this moment?

One last story: A number of years ago, myself and another monk were the secretaries and "Mr. Fix-its" of Amaravati. Amaravati at that time had a resident community of about 50 or 60 people and a lot of stuff was

always happening there. People would come to the office when anything needed to be done or fixed or decided, asking, “What are we going to do about the roof on the nuns’ vihāra?” “What are we going to do about the water tank?” “What are we going to do about this teaching engagement?” Over and over again, I would find myself taking responsibility for the problem and looking after it myself. The other monk, who had an equal set of duties, always managed to avoid taking on the responsibility. I would wonder how, every time, he seemed to manage to do that. Then I noticed that when someone brought a question or a problem to us, I would come up with solutions or advice and take it on as my own concern. He, in contrast, would respond by saying, “Good question,” and asking what the person was going to do about it themselves. He wasn’t being lazy or evasive; he’d simply realized the value of this very skilful form of response that I just hadn’t ever thought to use.

So when the mind begs for an answer, we can respond with “Good question,” or simply recognize that this is a doubt. Doubts arise and pass away. Use any skilful means you can to get some leverage and step out of the story line of the doubt, out of that structure that says: “If I just had the answer to this I would be happy.” We can simply recognize that “this is a feeling,” that “there’s a question.” Although it seems like the universe will not be complete if we do not get the answer to the question, we can recognize that, in truth, the universe is complete already. It’s just that there is this one thing that happens

not to be known. Then, we are able to shed all the turmoil that the doubting mind can generate.

Some people have very little difficulty with doubt; for others, it can be a major obstacle. The Buddha said doubt is like making a long journey through a desert. Getting to the other side of doubt, dropping doubt, is like getting through that desert safely. He also used the analogy of the mind in doubt being like cloudy water, muddy water. And not just any muddy water – he said it’s like muddy water in a bowl in a dark cupboard.

I once heard the Christian monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast, talk about the three principle vows of Christian monasticism: renunciation, celibacy, and obedience. He spoke of them in terms of three different conundrums. For “renunciation” there was “When I lose myself, I am more truly myself than at any other time”; for “celibacy” there was “When I am most intimately alone, I am most intimately one with all.” He talked about obedience in terms of the conundrum of, “When I drop the question, the answer is there.” Obedience is about listening. It comes from the Latin *ob audiens*, to be completely listening.

It’s similar to the way we work with compassion, as described in Lesson Five, and with intuition, as was discussed in the Questions of Lesson Three. We get through doubt by employing the same kind of process, by dropping the question or being able to say, “Good question,” or, “This is only a question. My experience is complete in and of itself.” When we approach doubt in this way, what we find is that the answer often appears. If you allow a bit of space around a doubt, then the answer

arises from the intuition of your own heart. You cannot think your way to the end of a doubt, but when you leave it alone, when you give it some space, you can tap into your own intuition a lot more easily.



GUIDED MEDITATION

SIX

Attend to the Body

Establish the spine in an upright position and centre the attention in the body. Let the spine stretch a little and grow upwards, helping to lend a quality of alertness, of energy. Then let the rest of the body relax and soften around that, and feel the presence of the body in the space of awareness.

Slowly sweep the attention through all the different parts of the body. If you find any tightness or tension in the body, clenched muscles in the face or the shoulders, the stomach, the legs, wherever it might be, consciously let yourself relax the tension. Establish the body in a balance of energy and relaxation, the body both alert, upright, and completely at ease, at rest.

Narrow the Attention onto the Breath

To help sustain the attention in the present moment, narrow the field of focus onto the breath, onto this simple, gentle, pattern of feelings. Experience the body breathing in its own rhythm. Let this be the very centre of your attention. Let the sounds you hear, the rustling leaves, the cars on the road, any sounds, let them be around the perimeter. Feelings of the

body, different thoughts that arise, let them be at the edges of the attention. Let the feeling of the breath be the central marker – the heart of your attention.

Working with the Hindrances

Take this simple exercise to be the aim of your attention for the next few minutes. Whatever arises in your mind to be figured out, calculated, planned, recollected, fought against, chased after; whichever hindrances, whichever of these five different obstacles that arise; try to work with them in some of the ways described in this lesson. Whatever manifests, whether there's agitation, sense desire, irritation, dullness, doubt. As the mind drifts in one of these directions, try to apply the advice given in the lesson.

Use the Buddha's analogies to see if you can feel the state of being in a desert, or in debt, or in prison. When you're free of that particular obstacle, let it go... let it settle... let it fade. Notice the quality of freedom from prison, from debt, being out of the desert... notice how good that feels.

You don't have to create particular problems or obstacles; they'll arise on their own! Just keep the attention as fully as you can with the breath and let these minutes of meditation – the next 10, 15, 20 minutes – unfold as they will. Work with different obstacles as they arise. If there are no obstacles, enjoy the present. Open the heart to the present.

If you're irritated by a feeling or a thought, counteract the irritation, the aversion, with loving-kindness, open-heartedness, acceptance. If the mind is caught in an interesting sexual fantasy, contemplate the downside of pursuing desire. If you really got what you wanted, if you had to live with it, in

that state, for one year, 10 years, 100 years, how would that be? If you're experiencing feelings of dullness, straighten the spine, open the eyes, rouse the energy. If you're experiencing restlessness, follow the out-breath really closely, fully, to its end, calming the body, letting the body settle fully and completely. If you're experiencing doubt, wondering what you are supposed to do, whether you're doing the right thing, step out of the doubt by saying, "This is a good question."

Sustain the Balance

Work with all the different drifts and pulls – blown by the winds, pulled by the tides, tugged by the currents, nudged by the different sea creatures, shoved by the engine – work with all these different forces pulling and tugging in different directions. Work, adjust, being sensitive to the different kinds of forces working on the mind. Adjust the mind. Accommodate the present experience. Counteract the hindrance. Sustain the quality of balance here in the centre.

End of Meditation

QUESTION AND ANSWER

SIX

Q: Could you elaborate on working with sense desire by imaging yourself in that state for 100 years, or any other helpful hints you might have?

A: Say you're having a fantasy, a sexual fantasy, and you're locked in a glorious embrace with someone. The delight of that depends on its transience, right? Because if you imagine yourself in a wonderful embrace that goes on for an hour, you might think, "Well, that's all right." But suppose it goes on for a day, without moving. It loses its glamour after ten or twelve hours. After a day, it starts to be work. What about for one year? That's cruel and inhuman punishment! What about ten years? You'll start to wonder, "When am I ever going to get out of this bed?" You'll think you've had enough of this person; you've been face to face with each other for ten years. Consider the attractiveness of that, or of whatever else the mind might be drawn to, like a wonderful piece of music. If you play Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony" 150,000 times, it loses its attraction.

Whatever is sensually appealing or attractive depends on the circumstances, but we don't realize the dependent nature of it. So, when you want to follow things through

in this reflective way, you say, “Yes, and then... and then... and then... and then...”. What often happens is that you hear a subtle voice that tells you to let go, because you’re realizing the nature of the desire mind. It’s as if we’ve called its bluff. And the desire is only able to capture the mind, like the card trick, because you can’t quite see what the hands are doing. So you uncover the illusion using the imagination to see the downside of a desired outcome. You calmly and steadily think it through.

When the mind is pulled by desire – “If only I had that banana,” “If only I had those noodles,” “If only I could get hold of such-and-such” – the lie that you’re hearing at that time is that the universe has shrunk to such an extent that if you could just possess this one thing, which is the only thing that exists for you in that moment, you would be totally happy. Getting familiar with this is like bringing the desired object into the centre of the stage and shining a light on it and saying, “Oh yes. Oh, really? You’d never want anything ever again...?” “Oh, shut up! You’re ruining the whole thing!” That’s why the lights at nightclubs are always very dim. I don’t go to nightclubs, but I remember these things. There is a dim red light so you can’t see all the wrinkles and cracks; you can keep the illusion going. There are bright lights in McDonald’s because they want to move people through quickly. You don’t feel comfortable in the bright light, because you can see everything. It all shows, so the place is never filled up. The desire mind works a lot on keeping the illusion going.

When I was about three or four, we were a very poor family – we were farmers – so there was very little money around. The family system was that the kids only got presents at Christmas or birthdays – that was it. Our farm was near a village, and in the village there was a toy shop. In the window of the toy shop, they had various little toy cars, what they called Matchbox cars. I was born in 1956, and in the late '50's there was this car that BMW produced, a 3-wheeled car with two wheels at the front and one at the back, and a door on the front. This was called a “bubble car” in England. In the toy shop window, there was this little mauve bubble car, and I fell completely in love with it. Every time we went to the village, I would race to the toy shop window and press my nose against the glass and be transfixed by this little mauve bubble car. I begged my mother to buy this little bubble car for me. I begged, and I begged, and I begged. But it wasn't my birthday and it wasn't Christmas, so she said no, no bubble car. I remember distinctly saying to her: “If you just get me the bubble car, I'll never want anything ever again. I'll never ask for anything ever again.” I sincerely believed – at that age – I really believed that was true, because I couldn't imagine wanting anything else. If I had that, my life would be utterly complete. Then, two or three weeks before my birthday – I was too young to figure this out – the little mauve bubble car vanished from the window of the toy shop. It was gone. It was too late. And I was really upset. Of course, the toy shop owner was in cahoots with my mother; I went inside and said, “Is that little bubble car still here?” “Oh no, I don't think so. Oh, I don't know

where it's gone. Sorry." I was broken-hearted. Then my birthday came, and with it... the little mauve bubble car.

Of course, I was utterly enraptured and totally happy and intoxicated for at least a day. The next day, I played with it just a little bit less. The third day, a little bit less. By the fourth day, it was getting left on the shelf. A couple of weeks later, I asked my mum for something else. She reminded me that I promised that I would never want anything ever again. She got on my case, in a playful way. And I said, "Yes, but this is different."

Isn't this an archetypal situation, one we're all familiar with? Actually, my mother still has the little mauve bubble car. It's a family heirloom. They've moved house about four times since then, but the little mauve bubble car has stayed in the family. So, this is my icon of desire, the little mauve bubble.

How many little mauve bubbles do we have? It could be the next woman, the next guy, the next degree, the next house, the next occupation. "If I could just get through this course." "If I could just get rid of this guy." "If I could just get hold of this woman." "If I could just get rid of this illness." "If I could just get hold of..." "If I could just... then..." The universe shrinks, and we buy into that promise. At that moment we're absolutely sure that this is it. When we experience the moment of gratification, it's like biting into the berry pie. There is an absolute bliss. But it's not going to last. It can't last.

It's important to realize that it's not as if the Buddha was being a negative sourpuss in pointing all this out to us. Rather, this is a fact of nature: it cannot last. We can't

stay in bliss for eternity because of the bite of pie. If you sat there with a mouth full of pie for an hour, it would get pretty old pretty fast. Thinking it through in that way is a sobering reflection. Not because we want to make ourselves miserable, but just to reveal the trick.

The word “glamour” is an ancient word. Its origin is from the situation in which, for example, a sorcerer, someone who had magical powers would disguise themselves; they would put a glamour on. For example, in the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus comes back to Ithaca, Athena, who was his protectress, put a glamour on him so that he looked like an old man and the people of Ithaca wouldn't recognize him. A glamour is a disguise that prevents the reality from being seen. This process we are talking about here is a seeing through the glamour.

We spend hundreds of billions of dollars sustaining the glamour. A year or so ago, we went to Los Angeles to listen to the Dalai Lama's teachings. The local newspaper was full of pages and pages and pages of plastic surgery options. People were offering to tweak things I didn't even know existed, and tweaking them in ways that were amazingly ingenious, just to keep the glamour going. I haven't seen a recent statistic but, in 1999, 150 billion dollars was spent in the U.S. on plastic surgery and weight-loss products, eating things to make you weigh less. That's a lot of resources to sustain the glamour. There is a strong tendency within us that wants to prolong the glamour.

Being willing to see through it reflects a spiritual maturity, a growing up within us, that says that we

recognize that no matter how well you sustain the glamour, it can only hold for so long, and it only works in certain circles, with the lights at a certain angle. And it's not just the physical appearance – it manifests in many, many aspects of our lives: the car you drive, the degrees you have, the organizations you belong to, the charities you support, the slogan on your T-shirt.

Q: When I'm in a situation that's very satisfying, very happy, very pleasant – and I'm pretty responsive to things so I can just really go with it – there's always this little voice going, "Maybe you shouldn't get that excited about it because we know it's passing." And so there's always a debate about how much to let oneself really be engaged by the moment, and then the dialogue moves on to, "What's it feel like to be really engaged and then let it go?" We want to be engaged but want it to be pleasant so the equation isn't equal. Could you speak to that?

A: This is a good question.

It's not a fixed thing, there's not one right way to respond. You have to look at the results of your action in the given situation, because the way we can best learn about right action is by looking at the intention that motivates the action, and then looking at the results of having followed that action. So you're looking at the intention beforehand; what it feels like when you're performing the action; and then looking at the results of it afterwards.

Weighing up the whole thing before, during and after.

Q: In letting oneself really enjoy something that's happening, given the human propensity that if you like it, you'd want to do that all the time... In meditation you can say, "Well, I wouldn't like it for 12 hours," but in regular life, if you're enjoying being with lots of people, you can just be drawn into the enjoyment of it, and then I think this just reinforces the kind of attachment of wanting things to be happy, wonderful.

A: Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't. You need to look at the intention, to ask what is behind this impulse? What is the pull into it? What's behind the pull? What's the effect of it? Do I grab every opportunity for this experience whenever it arises? Is this desire always seeking another outlet? Or can I choose to follow it or not follow it? Does that feel the same? You weigh it out like that.

You see the effect on you while you're engaged in the action. You notice that, if there is a big charge to it, how much it is likely to create or sustain an addiction. If you see that the heart is really pulled that way, you realize that it's like a junkie having a good supply of clean drugs. As long as the supply keeps up, it's fine. But when the supply is cut off, there will be a lot of trouble. It will be very, very painful. Only we can tell for ourselves if the dependency is there, or not. The sure-fire indicator is if it's the same to be with it or not with it; then you know.



ON WALKING MEDITATION

In amongst the various aspects of spiritual training in the Forest Tradition, of those that emphasize the physical dimension, one in particular stands out – walking meditation. This is not that well known as a method of mind training outside of certain Buddhist circles.

For most people the word “meditation” immediately brings to mind an image of someone seated in the lotus posture with eyes gently closed, back erect and countenance serene. Even when the most materialistic of corporations, such as car manufacturers, credit card companies or life assurance dealers, want to convey a spiritual element to their promises, this is the archetypal image that they use.

In many systems of Buddhist meditation, and particularly in the Forest Tradition, however, it is customary and considered highly beneficial to intersperse the periods of sitting meditation, which usually last about an hour, with corresponding periods of walking meditation, of an equal duration. This was a practice that the Buddha developed and sustained throughout his life.

The Methodology is Very Simple

You establish a path on as flat a piece of ground as you can find – ideally about 20-25 yards long – and determine what your two end points will be, say between a certain rock at one end and a large tree at the other. Before beginning the walking practice you stand still at one end of the path and sweep the attention up and down through your body, to establish an awareness of the body's presence and to relax before beginning. When a mindful awareness of the body has been made firm, you start walking.

There are a variety of different objects of focus that can be used for walking meditation – just as with sitting meditation – but generally the most accessible is simply the feeling of the feet touching the ground as one walks along at an easy, natural pace. As the mind wanders into memories and plans, or is distracted by the varying sights and sounds, you just keep letting go and returning the attention to the present moment, returning to the sensation of the feet along the path.

In this way the body and its movement, oscillating between the two ends of the path, becomes like the feeling of the breath, oscillating between the inhalation and the exhalation. This natural cycle thus serves to be a focal point, bringing the attention to the reality of the present, and is a calming influence for the many kinds of distracted thought.

When walking meditation is well-developed, there can be found within it a stillness of being, a spiritual restfulness that is easily equivalent to that found in the more stationary mode of sitting meditation. You find that there is a clear awareness

of the movements of the body but, since awareness is always “here,” there is a motionlessness that forms the environment within which the motion is taking place. This is what Ajahn Chah would call being like “still, flowing water.”





THE AUTHOR

Born in England in 1956, Ajahn Amaro received his BSc. in Psychology and Physiology from the University of London. Spiritual searching led him to Thailand, where he went to Wat Pah Nanachat, a Forest Tradition monastery established for Western disciples of Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah, who ordained him as a bhikkhu in April 1979.

He returned to England in October 1979 and joined Ajahn Sumedho at the newly established Chithurst Monastery in West Sussex. In 1983 he made an 830-mile trek from Chithurst to a new branch monastery, Harnham Vihāra, near the Scottish border.

In July 1985, he moved to Amaravati Buddhist Monastery north of London and resided there for many years. In the early 1990s, he started making trips to California every year, eventually establishing Abhayagiri Monastery near Ukiah, Northern California, in June of 1996. He lived at Abhayagiri until the summer of 2010, holding the position of co-abbot along with Ajahn Pasanno. At that time, he then moved back to Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England to take up the position of abbot of this large monastic community.



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