Lessons In Practical Buddhism

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Introduction

This book is based on a sample of audio and video teachings originally given via YouTube and as part of various local meditation courses. An attempt has been made (by myself and others) to rework the material into a suitable form for reading; it is certain more work needs to be done to make a professional work, but the present edition is a best effort in the time available and hopefully better than nothing. All faults in the work are my own responsibility, especially the rambling style of some of the chapters, which hopefully a professional editor can some day help to pare down to a proper length.

Much thanks and appreciation to those people who have helped to make this book possible: my parents who were my first teachers, my teacher and preceptor, Ajaan Tong Sirimangalo, and those kind beings who were the transcribers and editors of this material for the purpose of putting together this book.

For more information on my activities and original audio and video teachings, please visit my weblog at http://yuttadhammo.sirimangalo.org/ or my YouTube channel at http://www.youtube.com/yuttadhammo.

My hope in putting together this book is that more people may benefit from the teachings of the Buddha on a practical level; it seems to me proper that if one wishes to live in peace and happiness, it behoves one to work to spread peace and happiness in the world in which one lives.

May all beings be happy.

Yuttadhammo

November 13th, 2012 CE

Dedicated to my teacher, Ajaan Tong Sirimangalo, who is to me a living reminder that the Buddha once walked this Earth.

Celebrating A Buddhist Holiday

Whenever we are living the spiritual life and performing wholesome deeds of thought, speech, and body, that is an auspicious day, an auspicious hour, an auspicious moment – even if it is just for an instant, that instant is auspicious. It's not the time or the place or environment, it's the actions, the speech and thoughts that we perform. This is what makes something auspicious, this is what makes something special. We are very lucky to be here, and this is a very auspicious time and place for us, but it is because of what we are doing, not where we are.

When I was living in Thailand, every year at the Thai New Year there was great excitement throughout the country. We would take the bus and see people engaged in fist fights on the street, walking drunk in the middle of traffic, throwing water and ice cubes and all sorts of things at the cars and motorcycles as they went by. I would tell my students how the people talk about having a happy new year and always wish happy new year to each other, but that actually December 31st is the most dangerous day of the year for most of the world – the most unnatural fatalities of the whole year are on that day. Well, in Thailand it's actually the second most dangerous – the most dangerous day is the Thai New Year, which comes in April.

My teacher explains how there is more than one way of celebrating a holiday. When there is a special occasion, there is more than one way of using it to bring happiness. Ordinary people rejoice and celebrate by engaging in sensual pleasure and indulgence, but how should we celebrate as practising Buddhists? Moreover, what exactly should we celebrate? What should we be happy about? Why should we rejoice? These are good questions, really. We might begin to think that everybody else gets to have all the fun; ordinary people have good food to eat, nice clothes, houses and cars, so many wonderful things that they can enjoy. They can go where they want, live how they want, and the whole material world is at their disposal.

Even in regards to becoming a monk, we have the idea that

when you ordain you get to live in the perfect hut on the perfect mountain with a perfect sunset and a perfect forest; when we actually go to live in a monastery and see that the food is no good, the water is no good, the kutis have leaks, the forest has leeches, snakes, scorpions, even mosquitoes, etc. – nothing is you would like it to be. Instead, you have to live off cold food and contaminated water; you have to put up with mosquitoes, snakes, scorpions, leeches, termites, leaking roofs and so on. Some people might very well wonder why we're here – there doesn't seem to be much to celebrate. Of course we don't think this, we are very happy here. We should be very happy here anyway – if you are not, listen up, because there are many things for us to be happy about. We can use tonight as an example.

Here we are, sitting in meditation under the full moon. All that is between us and the full moon is the majestic Bodhi tree. This Bodhi tree is a descendant of the tree under which the Buddha himself sat. In ancient time they brought a branch of the great Bodhi tree from Bodh Gaya to Sri Lanka, and planted it in Anuradhapura. That tree in Anuradhapura has since been cultivated and brought to many places around the world. One branch came here. So this tree is a descendent from the original tree. Here we are in a Buddhist monastery in a Buddhist country, listening to a talk on Buddhism about the practice of Buddhist meditation, living the life of a Buddhist meditator, striving to find the truth of life and freedom from suffering; striving to make ourselves better people, to purify our minds, to cleanse our minds of all defilements. This in itself is something very rare in the world, something very much worth rejoicing over. Maybe sometimes we don't realize how lucky we are. We should rejoice in how lucky we are.

What is it that makes us lucky? First, we were born in a time when the Buddha's teachings are to be found. Buddhas don't come into the world every day. The Buddha didn't work for just a week or so to become a Buddha. You can look in the world and see whether there has been any one who could compare with the Buddha over the last 2500 years; if we are honest, we will have to say that there has not. Yet, 2500 years is nothing compared to the time it takes to become a Buddha; it took our teacher four uncountable

eons and 100,000 great eons to become fully enlightened.

A great eon is the time it takes from the big bang until the end of the universe – the big crunch or whatever the end of the universe is. 100,000 great eons is the small part of the time it takes. The large part is the four uncountables. It is theoretically possible to count the time from the big bang to the big crunch but an uncountable eon is, by definition, uncountable; it took the Buddha more than four uncountable eons to become enlightened.

So here we are, in the time of the Buddha. We missed the Buddha himself; who knows what we were doing when he was teaching. Maybe we were drinking or gambling, maybe we weren't even humans. Somehow we missed the chance. All that is left for us now is the Dhamma. This is why we protect and revere the dhamma as well, because it's all that we have left after the Buddha passed away – the dhamma and the sangha who has passed it on.

The sangha refers those people we ordinarily think of as our teachers, but actually they are only responsible for passing on the Buddha's teachings and to be an example to us in our practice. They can never replace the Buddha as a teacher, so it might be easy to become discouraged in this day and age, thinking we have no teacher. The Buddha, foreseeing this, taught that the dhamma itself would be our teacher after he passed away:

> *"siyā kho panānanda, tumhākaṃ evamassa — 'atītasatthukaṃ pāvacanaṃ, natthi no satthā'ti. na kho panetaṃ, ānanda, evaṃ daṭṭhabbaṃ. yo vo, ānanda, mayā dhammo ca vinayo ca desito paññatto, so vo mamaccayena satthā.*
>
> "It may be, Ananda, that you will think, 'the teaching has passed away with the teacher; there is no teacher for us.' You should not see it thus, Ananda. Whatever dhamma and discipline (vinaya) has been taught and laid out to you, that will be your teacher after my passing away."
>
> – DN 16

The teaching itself is all we have left for a teacher; when the dhamma and the sangha are gone it will be just dark water. It is like we are on an island, slowly sinking into the ocean. Once the island is gone, there will be no refuge for beings. It will be like drowning in an endless ocean with no sign of shore, floating around and falling prey to the sharks and crocodiles, tossed about in the storms of the vast dark ocean of samsara.
For now, we still have this teaching and can put it to practice. This is something that is very lucky for all of us, making this an auspicious time.

The second thing we should rejoice in is that not only are we living in the time of the Buddha's teaching but we have been born as human beings. If you had been born a dog, a cat, an insect, a snake, or a scorpion, it goes without saying that you could not obtain much benefit from such a life. We may not know what we did, but we must have done something right. We were floating around in the ocean of samsara and somehow we managed to find a way to be born as a human being.

The Buddha gave a comparison of a sea turtle in regards to how rare human birth really is. He said, suppose there was a turtle that lived at the bottom of the ocean that every one hundred years would come up for air. Then, suppose someone were to throw a yoke into the great ocean (a yoke is the bar of wood that they put on the neck of an ox to harness it to a cart). So, every one hundred years the sea turtle would come up to the surface, and in the whole of the ocean there was one yoke floating, tossed about by the four winds. Well, the Buddha said that it would be more likely for such a sea turtle, when rising from the bottom of the ocean every one hundred years, to touch the surface with its neck in the yoke, than for an ordinary animal to be born a human being.

As an animal, there is not much one can do to cultivate one's mind; it's mostly kill or be killed. Opportunities to practice morality, to develop concentration, and obtain wisdom are very rare. Yet somehow, floating around in the ocean, we managed to put our neck up inside the yoke. We were born human beings. I don't know how we got here. I don't think

any of us know how we became human beings. If you have that sort of special knowledge, then maybe you know what you did; mostly we don't have a clue – we are just happy to be here. We should be happy to be here, anyway. We've met with Buddhism, and we've met with Buddhism as a human being.

These two things are very difficult to find. As the Buddha said, "kiccho buddhānamuppādo – the arising of a Buddha is a difficult thing to find. (Dhp 182)" "Kiccho manussapaṭilābho – a human life is a difficult thing to find."

Further, we have been born as a human being with arms, legs and body parts – including brains, in fairly good working order; good enough to be able to walk and sit, anyway. Good enough to be able to think, read, and study, and good enough to practice. Our bodies work, we are still alive and well – how long have we managed to avoid death, dismemberment, sickness and disability?

After everything we have been through in this life, we are still alive and well and able to practice the Buddha's teaching. We have managed to make it through school, to find a job and make enough money to live our lives in ways that allowed us to find our way to a monastery and dedicate ourselves to the Buddha's teaching. This too is a part of the difficulty that we have faced and conquered: "kicchaṃ maccāna jīvitaṃ – difficult is the life of humans." Difficult to find is a life that is free from illness, difficulty, and obstacle – a life that allows us to come together from all parts of the world to find the Buddha's teaching. Very few people have this opportunity.

The third thing that makes us lucky is that we actually desired to take the opportunity. Compared to all the people in the world that don't have the opportunity, very few are the people who have the opportunity to ordain and undertake the spiritual life in earnest, but among those people who have the opportunity, even fewer are those people who actually have an earnest wish to take the opportunity.

How many people, when you told them you were going to practice meditation, got a confused look on their face or even ridiculed you? When you decided you decided to

ordain, how many people looked at you like you were crazy, or even abandoned you completely? How many people have you heard say: “monks are useless,” “meditators are wasting their time,” “living a peaceful life is a selfish thing to do,” and so on? Many people have the opportunity, but would never think of even attending a meditation course, let alone becoming a monk or dedicating their lives to meditation practice.

That’s certainly something worthy of rejoicing; rejoicing about how lucky we are just having this mind. It’s not really up to “us”, is it? It’s not like we chose to have this mind, and yet suddenly our mind says: “I want to become a monk” or “I want to go meditate.” It’s kind of funny really because it’s not like we chose to have such a mind. It’s not like other people chose to have the mind that didn’t want to do such things. We cultivated this. Somehow we managed to, almost accidentally, get something right. We should feel happy about that and rejoice in it. How wonderful it is to have this wonderful mind that wants to meditate, that wants me to devote my life to the Buddha’s teachings.

Of course, we don’t want to feel proud or gloat about it, but we can at least feel happy about it, encouraged by it. We can feel confidence and encouragement. When you need encouragement you should think like this – “I’m not a horrible person, I’m not a useless person, I may not be the best meditator but at least I want to meditate. At least I do meditate.” This is the third blessing that we have, that we should be happy about and rejoice over.

The fourth blessing to rejoice over is that we have actually taken the opportunity when it presented itself. As the Buddha said:

> *appakā te sattā ye saṃvejaniyesu ṭhānesu saṃvijjanti; atha kho eteva sattā bahutarā ye saṃvejaniyesu ṭhānesu na saṃvijjanti.*
>
> “Few are those beings who are disturbed by what is truly disturbing; those beings who are undisturbed by what is truly disturbing are far more.”

– AN 1.331

Rare are the people who understand that we can't live like this, that we can't be negligent. It is far more common for people to live under the assumption that nothing will go wrong in our lives, that bad things will not happen to us, that when we die we will go to a good place, or be extinguished forever.

Actually, a human being is like a person walking a tightrope; any moment we could slip off and fall into death or suffering or whatever lies in wait below. If you were up here meditating during the lightning storm two nights ago you can understand this. It's quite an experience really, realizing how thin is the rope on which we are walking. At any moment, something could knock you off and if you haven't prepared yourself or learned anything useful in your life, how could you be ready for it? You would die without any clarity of mind, without any presence, without any awareness. You would die with a muddled, confused mind, and be reborn in a corresponding state. Many people have no concept of how precarious our situation really is, and yet we are able to see this.

Not only are we able to see this, but we have acted on it, which is a rare achievement as well, as the Buddha taught:

> *"appakā te sattā ye saṃviggā yoniso padahanti; atha kho eteva sattā bahutarā ye saṃviggā yoniso na padahanti."*
>
> "Few are those beings who, disturbed, put out wise effort; those beings who, though disturbed, do not put out wise effort are far more."
>
> – AN 1.332

Some people see the danger of being negligent, but do nothing about it. They think, "yeah, that would be great if I could do some meditation or something spiritual," but they don't do it. Seeing this, the Buddha taught that as rare are the people who have understanding of danger, far more rare are the people who actually do something about it.

So here we have accumulated quite a number of blessings in our lives, just by being at this spot at this time. We have the blessings of the Buddha and his teachings. We understand the teaching of the Buddha; we understand the four satipaṭṭhāna and vipassanā, we know the four noble truths and the eightfold noble path -these aren't elementary school subjects. These teachings aren't things that anyone else can teach you. We take them for granted sometimes, but even just the four foundations of mindfulness are enough to take you to nibbāna; enough to free you from the entire cycle of saṃsara – just the four foundations of mindfulness. As the Buddha said in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), "ekayano ayaṃ bhikkhave maggo – this path is the straight path, the one way – just the four foundations of mindfulness".

Being humans, we are able to understand this teaching. We are able to put the teaching into practice – we can walk, we can sit, and we can think. Our mind works, our body works, and we have given rise to the wholesome intention to practice meditation. We have confidence and knowledge that the Buddha's teaching is a good thing. There are many people who don't have as much; either they repudiate the Buddha's teaching or they doubt it to the extent that they can't practice it wholeheartedly. Even if they think it might be good, their doubt stops them from practising.

Here we don't have any of that. We have enough confidence to allow us to practice, to ordain, to fly around the world just to stay in a hut in the forest. How rare is that? We must have done something right to get here.

The fact is we have actually done it and succeeded. We made it. Of course, we are not fully liberated yet, but physically we have achieved our goal. We are here. We are where we should be. We are where we want to be. We are in a place where so many people will never have the chance to be. I consider this to be very lucky; I think we all should consider ourselves quite lucky. This is an auspicious occasion – and an auspicious moment in time. Here we are developing wholesome qualities of body, speech, and mind – this is what makes this moment auspicious.

It's quite fitting that we are meditating on the holy day. I used to joke to my students at Wat Doi Sutep in Chiang Mai,

Thailand: “So today is a holiday – no, it doesn’t mean you get a day off, it means you get to be holy.” In Buddhism we take the holiness of the day upon ourselves, rather than leaving the holiness to the day alone; we take it to mean something for ourselves, that the holy day is a time for us to increase our own holiness.

In Buddhism we don’t look for someone else to be holy for us; we take the responsibility upon ourselves. It’s not that we don’t believe in gods or angels but we figure they’ve got enough work to do for themselves so, rather than asking them or praying to them, we do the work for ourselves. In Buddhism, holiness isn’t reserved to a day, a god, or an angel – the holiness of the holiday is our own. This is what makes a Buddhist holiday; it’s not a day off.

This is what we should feel lucky about, what we should rejoice in. How do we rejoice as Buddhists? I think there is only one answer, the best way to rejoice – the best way to rejoice is practising to purify our minds. It’s difficult to rejoice in this, actually, because the equivalent in a physical sense would be on a holiday or on a festival to go home and clean your bathroom or kitchen. It doesn’t ostensibly seem like the best way to make use a holiday. Nonetheless, when you do have the day off, when you have the time to spare, this is when you should do your house cleaning. So, even if a Buddhist holiday were a day off, cleaning our minds would be the best use we could make of it.

But there is another way to understand practising as a means of celebrating a holiday because the practice is like an appreciation of this opportunity. How difficult it is to want to meditate, let alone to actually meditate! Meditation itself is a way of rejoicing at our good fortune. It’s like a victory lap at the end of a long race. It’s like proclaiming to the whole universe that we are succeeding, that we are attaining victory here under the Bodhi tree. We are meditating in spite of all the difficulties, in spite of all the improbability of getting to this point in time and space. We made it!

Our walking and sitting meditation is actually a celebration. It is a celebration of this special occasion. It is the consummation of all the work and hardship we’ve gone through in all the lives we’ve lived, wandering through the

darkness of samsara. Moreover, it is the act that purifies our minds, and so it is the act that brings us happiness. Without purity of mind there is no happiness; this act of meditating is that which brings us true happiness. As a result it should be something that we rejoice in.

It goes without saying how important it is to meditate at all times; this is just one more reason for us to apply ourselves to the meditation. Someone asked today whether we were doing anything special on the Buddhist holiday and I joked: "meditate more." It's true, though, isn't it? This is a chance for us to practice more intensively; it is a day when lay people will come to the monastery, take the eight precepts and listen to the dhamma. It's a time when people undertake the practice of morality, concentration, and wisdom; it's a good excuse, a special opportunity for all Buddhists. It's an especially good opportunity for us who are living in the monastery, who have the chance to take the opportunity in full; to take is as a joyful occasion for ourselves.

Here, we have the opportunity to meditate, and we take it. On the holy day we practice with greater conviction; it doesn't mean you have to necessarily practice for longer periods of time, but you will at least make more effort to be mindful knowing that this is the holy day, knowing that there is a full moon and we are under the Bodhi tree; thinking about the Buddha who sat under the Bodhi tree. Here we are, 20 feet away from the Buddha – the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha sat.

Finally, we can also take our practice as a puja towards the Buddha, a way of paying homage to the Buddha. We may wonder what we can do on a holy day to pay homage to the Buddha. The Buddha himself was very clear on this topic; when he was about to pass away and everyone was bringing flowers, paying homage to him, the Buddha taught that such homage wasn't proper homage to the Buddha. He said:

> *"yo kho, ānanda, bhikkhu vā bhikkhunī vā upāsako vā upāsikā vā dhammānudhammappaṭipanno viharati sāmīcippaṭipanno anudhammacārī, so tathāgataṃ sakkaroti garuṃ karoti māneti pūjeti apaciyati, paramāya pūjāya."*

> “Whether a bhikkhu or a bhikkhuni, a lay man or lay woman, when they dwell practising according to the teaching, realizing the teaching for themselves, practising properly according to the dhamma, this is a person who pays proper homage, pays proper respect, pays proper reverence, pays homage to the Buddha with the highest form of homage.”
>
> – DN 16

Every step we take is like offering a flower to the Buddha. The Buddha himself said our practice is the highest form of offering we can give. It is a gift to the Buddha, to the Buddha’s teaching, to the monastery, to the meditation centre, to the world. One step you take with mindfulness, clearly aware of the present moment as it is, with morality, concentration, and wisdom is the greatest gift you can give to yourself and to the entire universe.

Dangers

The best reason to practice meditation is that on the road ahead of us there is great danger; we are faced with great danger in our individual futures. Each and every one of us is in danger that we live with until we can find safety. The only difference is that some people see this danger and some don't see it. Since we can not prepare ourselves for the future if we don't understand the dangers we face, we must start our lives by learning of the dangers that lie before us.

According to the Buddha's teaching, there are a great number of dangers ahead of us. An understanding of these will encourage us to live our lives with care; it will prepare us for the future and allow us to avoid the things we can avoid and accept the things we cannot.

The first set of dangers ahead of us are birth, old age, sickness and death. These dangers are those that are common to all beings. It's true that there's no birth ahead of us in this life – we've already met with it; it's no longer a danger, it's now a reality, we have been born. Because of our birth we have to face all sorts of suffering and discomfort that come along with being human, suffering that comes hand in hand with being born – the other three: old age, sickness and death. These are dangers we cannot avoid in this lifetime. Even if we understand them thoroughly, even if we learn all that there is to know about them and prepare ourselves for them well in advance, we cannot avoid any one of them. The danger that we can avoid, however, is that they might catch us unaware, unprepared for them, in which case we will suffer great mental distress, unable to come to terms with their reality.

If we get old but are not prepared for old age – not prepared to be old and bent and aching and with the many ailments that come along with being old: having a poor memory, rotting teeth, false teeth, a bent back, arthritis, etc., and all the many ailments which come along with being old, if we don't have a mind which is well-trained and able to deal with such uncomfortable, undesirable states, then this is a great danger to us, something that is waiting for us and will cause

great suffering. This is a danger that even in this lifetime can be avoided, the danger of suffering because of old age, sickness and death. If we're not ready for cancer and then we happen to fall victim to cancer, or diabetes, heart disease, sickness that comes from old age, or even simple aliments like a cold or a flu, then when they come they will bring great suffering. More importantly, if we're not ready for death, then when death comes it will of course bring great suffering; if we're not ready to leave, if we're afraid of death, if we are not able to come to terms with the dying process then it too will bring great suffering.

We can see that often the danger in all of these things does not come from any sort of craving or attachment, it simply comes from not understanding them. For instance, by not understanding death, not knowing what to expect, not being able to come to terms with what's happening at the time of death, when we die we die confused and afraid, simply because we are not able to process the phenomena that are coming into our minds; not able to deal with the impermanence, with the new, the unusual, the unexpected.

In the practice of meditation we work at breaking our experience down into its ultimate reality. When we say "rising, falling" or when we have pain and say "pain, pain" or when thinking, "thinking", or "afraid", or "angry", or "upset", or "confused" whenever these arise, when we break experience down into what is truly real, then in the end anything that arises, no matter how strange or unexpected it may be, it becomes something very easy to deal with. At the time of dying there are still the same phenomena as throughout the life; even though the content may be different, there are still just moment-to-moment experiences of seeing, hearing, etc. At the time of sickness there is the same pain, aching, and discomfort that we have experienced countless times before, even though it may be of a different degree or frequency. Most importantly, we don't cling to concepts like "I have cancer" or "I am dying", staying focused at a level of ultimate reality: "there is pain," "there is fear," "there is anger," "there is upset," "there is worry," and so on, by simply saying to ourselves, for example, "worried, worried" or "afraid, afraid". When we remember to respond in this way, we aren't caught off guard by what

seems to be out of our ability to comprehend.

The practice of meditation, therefore, is extremely helpful in avoiding the dangers that are not inherent in these experiences but are caused by our aversion and fear of them. Beyond this, if we don't practice we are likely to be born again in a similar state, or even a state of greater suffering, in a place where food is scarce, luxury is non-existent. If we are negligent in developing our minds, we may be reborn as an animal, a ghost, or even in hell. We may be reborn any number of places. This is the danger of rebirth, and of course the danger of old age, sickness and death which follow. We're in danger of this. We're in danger of being born again and again. If our minds are not clear when we die, we're in danger of getting stuck in the same sufferings we have faced in this life and being confronted with the same dangers; or even worse, depending on where our minds lead us. If, on the other hand, we train and purify our minds, then at the moment when we die we may not even have to be born again. Or, if we are born again we will be born in a pure place, according to our state of mind when we die. So this is a first good reason to practice meditation, to avoid this first set of dangers that are waiting ahead of us.

The second set of dangers are those that exist for people who do evil deeds. Whenever we perform an unwholesome act, we face these dangers; as long as we have unwholesomeness in our mind, the opportunity for us to commit such unwholesome deeds exists, and so the danger lays in wait for all of us until we are able to cleanse our minds of these defilements. The first danger is attanobhaya; the danger of self-blame, the danger of rebuking ourselves, the danger of feeling guilty for bad things which we have done. The second is parassabhaya, the danger of other people blaming us, the danger of receiving blame from other people for our evil deeds. Third is daṇḍabhaya, the danger of being punished for our deeds; and fourth, duggatibhaya, the danger of rebirth in a state of suffering. This is another set of four dangers that are ahead of us.

The danger of feeling guilty for our unwholesome deeds, blaming ourselves, is ever-present; whenever we perform bad deeds there's always guilt that follows. This danger is

actually most apparent in good people; a good person will feel acutely guilty at even the smallest unwholesomeness, just as a fastidiously clean person will experience acute repulsion at the smallest impurity on their body, clothing or possessions. A person who engages in evil deeds habitually will not likely feel much guilt for even the most heinous act. As the Buddha says in the Dhammapada, “pāpopi passati bhadraṃ, yāva pāpaṃ na paccati” – an evildoer may meet with fortune for as long as the evil has not ripened. Nonetheless, with every evil deed they perform, they will sink deeper into depravity, and be consumed by the fires of greed, anger and delusion, which the Buddha said burn in the mind by day and smoulder by night. Every evil deed an evil doer performs will reaffirm the evil tendencies in their minds, making it less and less likely that they will be able to reform themselves and find a way out of their depravity, while all the while they will suffer the mental anguish that comes from the defilements. Moreover, an evildoer will suffer from constant fear of being caught and punished for their deeds and will suffer great mental torment as a result.

Based on wrong views, ordinary people even feel guilty for deeds that have no unwholesome quality, like stepping on an insect without realizing it and thinking that one has committed murder. Once, in the Buddha’s time, a monk sat down on a chair that had a blanket on it and crushed a small child that was under the blanket. He was of course seized with remorse, but the Buddha made it clear that even this could not be considered murder – it was rather an act of negligence, and so he admonished the monks to look carefully before they sit down from that point onward. Self-blame is really a horrible curse, one that can cause people to commit suicide, unable to face the guilt. Sometimes people hate themselves for their physical appearance, sometimes for failure in their life or society. Such situations can be attributed to past karma or even just to circumstance, and should never be a source of guilt or self-hatred.

Worry is considered to be an unwholesome mind-state in the Buddha’s teaching; no good can come from it, and we often indulge in it as a substitute for real change. If we don’t make a strong determination to set ourselves in wholesome

mind-states, we will constantly return to evil deeds and the guilt and remorse that follow. Based on such guilt, we reaffirm our belief in self and the self-hatred that goes along with it. Once we develop clear understanding of reality, we will realize that our past deeds are done and gone and that there is no self that carries the guilt, only the impersonal repercussions that need not be a cause for further defilement. We will come to understand the impersonal nature of both the evil deeds and their results and will lose all inclination for and attachment to either. Until such realization comes to us, however, we are all faced with the danger of both evil deeds themselves and the remorse that comes along with them.

The danger of receiving blame from others is equally frightening as long as we cling to the idea of self. It's easier to blame others for their bad deeds than to see one's own faults; even those who hate themselves will try their best to hide their faults and make effort to criticize the faults of others to avoid attention to their own. Often it makes us feel better about ourselves to know that others are on the same level. As for those who hold themselves higher than others, they will use their poor judgement of others as a means of supporting their own feelings of superiority. Such people delight in finding fault in others for the slightest offense, or even for a non-offense.

Again, in the Dhammapada, the Buddha reminds us:

> *sudassaṃ vajjamaññesaṃ, attano pana duddasaṃ.*
> *paresaṃ hi so vajjāni, opunāti yathā bhusaṃ.*
> *attano pana chādeti, kaliṃva kitavā saṭho.*
>
> Easily seen are the faults of others; one's own faults, however, are hard to see.
> For others one winnows their faults like chaff;
> one's own, though, one hides as a deceitful cheat hides unlucky dice
>
> – Dhp 252

This sort of activity is common among those who have never taken up the practice of meditation, and the stress and

suffering that comes to the recipient of criticism is also common to those who cling to an idea of self. For those who have practised insight meditation, however, there comes the knowledge that what we call “self” is only a flux of experience, arising and ceasing, and so there is no target on which to pin such criticism. The criticism itself is not real, either; it is only speech that is interpreted by our mind as having some sort of meaning, leading to thoughts and that are then clung to as pleasant or unpleasant; the meditator will see this, and find nothing in the process that can be said to belong to oneself, freeing them from the burden of such criticism.

Moreover, through the practice of meditation, one will cease to perform any and all evil deeds, and therefore find no reason to fear what others might say. As my teacher once joked with us, “if someone calls you a buffalo, just put your hand on your backside and see if you have a tail. If you don’t have a tail, you’re not a buffalo.” The only sure way to be free from blame of others is to avoid evil deeds of thought, speech and deed. Then, even when others scold or criticize you, you will not be moved, since you see clearly that you have done nothing wrong, and that the criticism is just meaningless speech.

If we are not mindful when others praise us, we will be delighted, conceiving it to be pleasurable and clinging to it as belonging to us. Then, when others even hint at dispraise or criticism, we will be angered, displeased, even depressed and traumatized thinking the criticism also ours. It is this danger that the Buddha saw when he said in the Mangala Sutta, “phutassa lokadhammehi, cittaṃ yassa na khampati” – when touched by worldly vicissitudes, whose mind is not shaken, for them this is the highest blessing. So, we should take every precaution to ward off the danger in clinging to both the criticism and the praise of others.

At the same time, we should make all effort to avoid evil deeds or else even wise people will criticize us. Even if we are not moved by criticism, still our evil deeds will always meet with censure by the wise, and we will thus have no opportunity to associate with good people who will regard us as evil doers. This is a real danger that comes from evil –

that we will be only fit to associate with similar individuals, and will be ostracized from all good society.

Next, there is the danger of punishment in this life; legal punishment or punishment from enemies or evil friends and benefactors. Our parents, our spouses, our friends, the police, the country and so on, even to the point of being punished by other countries in the case of international crimes. Some parents beat their children for being naughty; some husbands beat their wives for the smallest wrong; some wives attack their husbands for being unfaithful; friends punish friends, enemies attack enemies. The world is full of enmity and vengeance of all sorts. This is a real danger we all face – that, through our unwholesome thoughts, we will do or say something that will lead to some sort of punishment from those around us; we may even, at times, receive punishment for things we didn't do. This, then, is another reason to avoid evil deeds and cultivate wholesome mind-states that will allow us to bear with any punishment we do receive.

The fourth danger in performing evil deeds is punishment in future lives. When we die, if our minds are full of anger, greed or delusion, we can only expect to continue towards more suffering. We may be born in hell, as an animal, or as a ghost, based on our state of mind when we die. We're born in this life as human beings, living the lives we are living, because our minds have brought us here. If one's mind is full of anger and hatred when one dies, they will be born in a place of anger and hatred, in hell. If one is full of greed and avarice, they will be born as a ghost. If one is full of ignorance and delusion, they will be born as an animal. If such unwholesome states are very strong one will risk being born in a state of great suffering. This too is a real danger awaiting us in the future if we still habitually cultivate and develop unwholesomeness.

The third set of dangers is made up of those that wait for people who strive to do good deeds. Some meditators complain of having a great many obstacles standing in the way of their practice; others simply give up when difficulty arises. It is important to realize that no good deed is easy to perform; a deed is only good if it changes our bad habits into

good ones, cleaning the defilement from our minds. We should never be discouraged or distracted by difficulty or defilements when they arise in our minds. We should see them as a means of building strength. As the Bodhisatta says in the Vessantara Jataka, when asked about his life in the forest,

Adversity breaks in a man,
just as a charioteer
breaks in a horse; adversity,
O king, has tamed us here.

– Jat. 547

The difficulty we meet with in practice should be compared to the taming of a wild horse. One can't simply blame the horse and give up, nor can one beat the horse to death hoping to somehow force it into submission. Through rigorous training, however, the habits of the horse can slowly be changed until it becomes wearied of its old ways and submits to the wishes of its master. In the same way, the untrained mind is wild and uncontrollable. At times in meditation one may think, "I am just not cut out for meditation" and want to give up. One may become frustrated by or afraid of one's own mind and want to force it to behave, repressing unwholesome tendencies out of fear and aversion. This sort of behaviour is useless in the long term, however, since it relies on concentration rather than understanding, and is therefore dependent on the power of concentration, which cannot be sustained for ever. If, on the other hand, one is patient and persistent, over time, one will teach one's own mind the stress and suffering created by its wild habits and bring it to let go of attachment to both pleasant and unpleasant experiences through the understanding of their leading to detriment.

As the Bodhisatta pointed out, it is only through facing adverse experiences that one can tame the mind; if one lets the mind follow after all of its inclinations, never facing the difficult experiences that are also a part of reality, there is no hope that one will ever train the mind to understand objective reality.

The third set of dangers are most important for a meditator to become familiar with so as to not be dissuaded from the goal because of them. The Buddha taught these dangers using the metaphor of crossing a body of water. Just as one attempting to cross a large body of water, much danger awaits for a meditator wishing to escape from samsara to the farther shore where safety and freedom from suffering are found. The four dangers the Buddha enumerated are

1) waves,
2) crocodiles,
3) whirlpools,
4) sharks.

These are four dangers for one wishing to reach the farther shore. They are also metaphors for the dangers that may stop us from reaching peace, happiness and freedom from suffering.

The first danger, waves, is what the Buddha called the eight worldly dhammas, eight vicissitudes of life that we easily get caught up in, even though they are worldly things of no inherent benefit. When we come to practice meditation, we try to leave behind worldly things, doing away with our attachment and aversion to the ways of the world. If we get caught up in such things, they will toss us about like waves on the ocean, and may even drown us with their force.

The eight worldly dhammas are fame and obscurity, praise and blame, gain and loss, and happiness and suffering. When we are famous, or have high status in society, it is easy to get caught up and proud of it. Some people become addicted to fame, constantly thinking of ways to become better-known or rise up in social status. Such people become devastated if they find themselves without status or fame, and thus are tossed about chasing after the peak of the next wave. Even meditators may succumb to such danger, letting their minds wander into thoughts of becoming famous or successful in the worldly sphere.

Likewise, when we receive praise, we can easily become caught up in it, addicted to the esteem of others, and tossed about whenever we receive dispraise. Some meditators become angry and obstinate when criticized by their

teachers, refusing to listen and even leaving the meditation centre without finishing their training simply because of their inability to withstand criticism. Others become caught up in their worldly accomplishments, relishing the praise that comes from involvement in the world, and so are unable to focus their minds on meditation, thinking only of the pleasure that comes from being among those who shower them with praise.

Gain as well can be a great hindrance to meditation if one worries about ones possessions or if craving for new possessions arises. Some monks become dissatisfied with the monastic life because of their remembrance of pleasant experiences when they were lay people. Some monks become infatuated with the lives of lay people and give rise to craving for what seems to be a life of happiness as compared to the difficult life of a monk. Some monks are even enticed by rich lay supporters to disrobe, with the promise of marriage or financial support once they disrobe. Likewise, those meditators who have much wealth will often fail to put out any real effort in the practice, unafraid as they are about the future, thinking that they are already safe and that their riches will protect them from all dangers. Often this prevents such people from even attending a meditation course, since they are unable to see the dangers that await even rich people if they are negligent.

The same goes for happiness – when we are happy and comfortable and not faced with any immediate suffering, we will become complacent. When our meditation practice becomes difficult, if we are not mindful and see the danger arising, we will become bored and dissatisfied, thinking only about the pleasure we could find doing other things. The Buddha called these things waves because they toss us about, back and forth, clinging to the good and chasing away the bad. As long as one allows the mind to be tossed about in this way, one will never reach the farther shore of safety and freedom from suffering.

The danger of crocodiles refers to laziness and indolence; thinking only about our mouth and stomach, unwilling to strive against even the slightest difficulty. Like a crocodile with a big mouth, a meditator who is lazy will think only

about eating, sleeping, and lounging around in idle diversion and negligence. When we first undertake to practice intensive meditation, it will likely be very difficult for us to follow a meditator's schedule: sleeping only four to six hours every day, staying in a simple dwelling with food only in the morning and of a simple nature. For some, this will be a reason to put out more effort to give up attachment to luxury and indolence. For others, it will swallow them like a crocodile; or rather they, like crocodiles, will be fit to do nothing but fill their mouths with food and lie around, wallowing in their laziness.

If we truly wish to become free from suffering, we must let go of attachment to all things, including comfort, luxury and pleasure. So, like the Bodhisatta, we should see it as a good thing to have to endure the hardships of meditation and monastic life. We should be patient and endure long hours of meditation with only little sleep, food, and conversation. We should even be ready to forgo these things entirely if necessary, practising throughout the night, avoiding conversation with others, and even surviving on little or no food if it is not available to us. The Buddha made clear that going intentionally without food is not correct, but that patience even when food is not available is far better than anger and dissatisfaction. We shouldn't try to avoid difficulty, or give in to laziness; we should instead try to avoid laziness, which is like a crocodile that will eat us up from within.

The danger of whirlpools refers to objects of sensual desire because they, like a whirlpool, drag us down, drown us, effectively ending our journey towards freedom. Everywhere around us, no matter where in the world we might be, we are constantly confronted with pleasant and unpleasant stimuli at the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, and the body. Because of our addiction to these experiences, and the chemical reactions they produce in the brain, we are like drunk people, unable to think clearly, incapable of meditation, spinning around and around like in a whirlpool. As with a whirlpool, it might seem pleasurable while we are spinning but slowly, inexorably, it draws us down to our demise. As with a whirlpool, the more caught up we become, the harder it is to get out of the cycle of addiction,

since the brain and mind together become habitually inclined towards the objects of addiction. This is a grave danger for meditators and non-meditators alike; only through constant mindfulness and ardent striving can one hope to stay free from the pull of sensuality.

The danger of sharks refers to sexual desire, which is arguably the most addictive form of sensuality in existence. Even apart from the sensual gratification, the mere thought of sexual gratification is enough to drive humans and animals alike into a form of temporary insanity. Like a shark that smells blood in the water, a being caught in the jaws of sexual desire will go into a frenzy, unable to find peace of mind until the desire is satiated. Sexual desire is like a shark because it catches one in its grasp and doesn't let go. Desire for food and other sensual stimulus can be discarded by most ordinary people, but for someone addicted to sexual gratification, there is often little that can be done but watch them be devoured by it like a shark. This is a real danger that can only be overcome by persistent remembrance of the three aspects of the moment-to-moment experience involved with desire: the objective stimuli of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and thinking; the pleasant feelings that arise from contact with such stimuli, and the desire and attraction that comes from indulging in them.

These four are dangers to us who are intent upon following the path to purification of the mind. We must be aware of them and alert to their existence if we are to reach the goal of the path. Once we have reached the goal, we will become free from all of these dangers, as well as the other dangers mentioned above. These last four dangers are, in fact, the path itself; it is by directly understanding and removing the power that such things have over our minds that we become free from suffering. One should never become disheartened when faced with these dangers; one should be confident like a soldier ready for battle and engage them head-on, defeating them with the weapons of mindfulness and wisdom.

This then is the Buddha's teaching on danger. It is a teaching that is meant to help us become true followers of the Buddha, "bhikkhu" in Pali. In Buddhism, there are two

kinds of bhikkhu: one refers to a monk who goes for alms (bhikkhā) and the other refers to “one who sees (ikkha) the danger (bhaya) in samsara”. The former is only a superficial appellation, and not the true mark of a follower of the Buddha. The latter, applying to one who sees the danger in becoming old, getting sick and dying, who sees the danger in living one’s life without training oneself in higher things, is the mark of a true follower of the Buddha’s teaching.

This teaching is given for the purposes of helping meditators see the dangers that are a part of life, the dangers that come from doing evil deeds and the dangers that come to those who would be free from evil deeds. It is taught so that we will not be caught off guard by the dangers of samsara that we must face on the path to freedom.

A Comprehensive Practice

Introduction

A common difficulty for newcomers to the Buddha's teaching is in acquiring a comprehensive understanding of the course of practice laid out by the Buddha. The Buddha himself often gave specific teachings to individuals or groups, tailored to suit the specific needs of the audience. Thus, at first glance, it may seem that in order to put his teachings into practice, one must either pick and choose according to one's preference or take the time to study all of the teachings and practice them all together. Since the latter is more or less impossible even for those who have the time, it is common to find Buddhists taking the former route, picking and choosing practices from the Buddha's teaching based on personal preference.

As a result, many Buddhists come to have a lopsided understanding of the Buddha's teaching and so too a lopsided practice – a practice lacking in certain aspects or deficient in certain qualities. For example, some meditators focus on tranquillity, neglecting to cultivate insight; others may focus on cultivating intellectual understanding and neglect the cultivation of tranquillity. Some Buddhists focus on charity and public service, while others focus on strict moral practice and austerity.

As a result, though all of these practices are designed to lead one closer to the goal of freedom from suffering, such practitioners may be unable to achieve the goal due to omitting other important, supportive aspects of the practice.

Putting aside the practice itself, the vastness of the Buddha's teaching creates problems on a different level in terms of clearly understanding what it was the Buddha actually taught. If one is not able to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the Buddha's teaching, one may give rise to misunderstanding, attributing qualities to the Buddha's teaching that it doesn't possess and denying its possession of attributes which it truly possesses. One may not

understand how the Buddha's teaching can lead to its goal, or even what that goal is in the first place. Beginners on the Buddhist path often find themselves confused or overwhelmed, and some may actually become disenchanted with the Buddha's teaching, thinking it an impractical or even useless teaching due to their inability to see clearly what it was the Buddha actually taught.

Some may say that the Buddha taught people to just close their eyes and ignore the world around them, that he taught nothing about how to live one's daily life. Even in the time of the Buddha himself, there were those who tried to pin various labels on him; in the Vinaya Piṭaka, for example, we find the Buddha confronted by a brahmin who accuses him of holding all sorts of extreme positions such as nihilism, self-torture, etc. In order to avoid such misunderstandings, it is important for Buddhist newcomers to obtain a comprehensive teaching; a teaching that covers all elements of practical Buddhism and provides a practice that is of use in all situations – a teaching that protects those who undertake it from all obstacles, challenges, and dangers on the path.

When undertaking the practice of Buddhist meditation, we have to remember that formal meditation practice is only one part of the Buddha's teaching and only one aspect of our development on the Buddhist path. Certainly it is the most essential, since only through meditation practice will one be able to see reality as it is. We must also, however, be equipped to deal with the many distractions, diversions, and obligations not directly related to the practice of walking and sitting meditation.

In our daily lives, there are many challenges to our practice that we must face – for example, making a living, harmonizing with our environment, or tending to our physical health, to name a few. If we are unable to deal with the many various aspects of life and practice skillfully, our foundational practice of walking and sitting meditation will be incapable of bearing fruit, just like a fruit tree that needs support and care in order to grow to maturity. Once we understand how to incorporate the Buddha's teaching into all aspects of life, our practice will progress smoothly, protected

from external interruption.

One of the most comprehensive teachings given by the Buddha on practical development of empirical insight is found in the Sabbāsava Sutta, the discourse on “all of the taints”, or “all of the defilements”. This sutta is of great benefit even for new Buddhist practitioners, since it explains all of the various ways of removing unwholesome habits from the mind. As the title suggests, it claims to provide a comprehensive practice for ridding one’s mind of all channels by which unwholesomeness, and therefore suffering, might arise. This discourse, the second sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya, is recommended reading for all Buddhists serious in undertaking practice of the Buddha’s teaching in order to realize enlightenment for themselves, rather than just worshipping or venerating the Buddha as one who himself practised rightly.

In this sutta, the Buddha explained seven practices that are intrinsically important in mental development, including but not limited to the meditation practice itself. These seven practices form a comprehensive practice, providing one with the ability to conquer any and all mental defilements that exist in the mind. For those approaching the Buddha’s teaching for the first time, it is also useful in providing a comprehensive understanding of the Buddha’s teaching as taught by the Buddha himself. By studying this teaching, one will see that the Buddha did indeed give instruction in all aspects of spiritual development, leaving out nothing of importance to the cultivation of the spiritual path.

The subject of the discourse is how to rid oneself of the taints (āsava) – those qualities of mind that cause one to act or speak in a way contrary to one’s own best interest; the unwholesome tendencies and misunderstandings that exist in the mind and give rise to suffering for ourselves and for other beings. In Buddhism these are considered to be the only true source of suffering; Buddhism denies the belief that suffering can be caused by another. Even when we cause suffering for other people, it is understood that it is ourselves who will suffer from our own actions, due to subsequent feelings of guilt, anger, fear, worry, etc. – the person we hurt can only suffer if they react to our actions negatively.

The evil deeds we perform unto others can bring to them directly at most only physical suffering. Unless the victim suffers from defilements of mind themselves and thus becomes upset about our actions and speech, they will not suffer in the mind no matter what we do or say to them. In this way, we understand that it is defilements of mind alone that can cause true suffering.

Seeing

In order to destroy all of the taints, the Buddha taught seven aspects of practice to be undertaken by a meditator. The most important aspect, of course, is the meditation practice itself, and this is where the Buddha begins, with the taints that are to be destroyed through seeing.

The core of the Buddha's teaching is to see things clearly as they are. He taught us to look at the reality that presents itself to us at every moment and see it clearly for what it is. He taught us to find the truth for ourselves, rather than simply accept his teachings as a dogma, theory, or belief. The Buddha taught mostly practical methods by which his students could come to understand things as they are, rejecting philosophical speculation as useless diversions undertaken to no end. So, if we want to understand what it was that the Buddha taught in brief, it is to see things as they are.

More specifically, the Buddha taught how to clear up our blind faith and attachments in the things that we cling to as stable, satisfying, and controllable. It was not the Buddha's intention that his students should come to learn everything; there is a famous story in the suttas where the Buddha, staying in a great forest, picked up a handful of leaves and asked the monks whether there were more leaves in his hand or more in the forest. He said that the leaves in the forest were like all of the things that he knew with his great wisdom, and the leaves in his hand were what he taught. This is because, as he said, most knowledge does not lead to true peace, happiness and freedom from suffering.

Nowadays it is common to read about new and exciting discoveries by the scientific community and the promise of

future advancement based on this knowledge, to the assumed benefit of the human race as a whole. When one looks, however, at the ways people generally make use of this knowledge and even the actual reasons why it is valued, there doesn't seem to be any greater purpose than the accumulation of material gain, often at the expense of other beings and even our own peace of mind.

If we look at the people who are said to benefit most from scientific advancements, we find that they are not more happy or content in general than people who live in poverty without much technological advancement at all. While it must be admitted that technology has brought a great empowerment to the human race, it is not at all guaranteed that humankind will use that power for its actual benefit. Knowledge alone cannot bring happiness or peace; only wisdom of how to use such knowledge in truly beneficial ways can accomplish such a worthwhile task.

The most important wisdom to attain, then, is that which allows us to become free from suffering. When we talk about "seeing" in the Buddha's teaching, we don't mean coming to see the truth about everything, but learning specifically about suffering and happiness and how they come to be. The Buddha focused his teaching on the building blocks of experiential reality because he saw that suffering comes about based solely on misunderstanding them. We practice insight meditation to understand the nature of experiential reality – how misunderstanding leads to bad habits and how bad habits and behaviours lead to suffering. When we come to see our moment to moment activities as they are, we will understand the difference between activities that are useful and those that are useless, and will thus be able to give up any and all habits that are a cause for suffering.

There is no use in running away from suffering nor in chasing it away; neither method is sustainable and both lead only to more stress and suffering. Simply seeing our experiences as they are, on the other hand, is the supreme method for becoming free from all suffering. This fact is easy to understand intellectually, for we must admit that if we could see clearly what wass to our benefit and what to our detriment, we would never knowingly engage in any activity

that would lead to our detriment. Yet, in spite of all of our intellectual knowledge, we find ourselves drawn ever and again towards actions, speech and thoughts that serve to cause us more and more stress and dissatisfaction. Intellectual understanding can therefore never be enough to free one from suffering. In order to become truly free from suffering, we must come to see clearly and empirically from experience as to which states of mind lead to suffering and which do not.

To accomplish this task, we must bring ourselves to observe suffering as it is. Rather than run away from suffering or try to chase it away, we must do just the opposite. We must welcome our suffering as giving us the opportunity to learn about suffering in general. The problem is not that suffering exists, the problem is that we do not see it clearly. The ordinary person is as though blind or in a dark room, bumping into everything and causing great suffering and upset because they cannot see anything. Once they turn on a light, there will be no question of walking into a piece of furniture, wall, or door. Insight meditation is truly as simple as turning on a light. Once one sees clearly, one will have accomplished all that need be done to let go of craving, clinging, and suffering.

This is the first important aspect of a comprehensive practice, practising to see the truth as it is – not the whole truth, just the noble, useful, and beneficial truths of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. Rather than looking everywhere for knowledge that serves no purpose, we should focus on what is truly useful and beneficial, giving up our pursuit of what is not. A person dedicated to becoming free from suffering should not think much about worldly affairs, speculations, or philosophy. One who desires to find true peace and happiness must dedicate themselves to seeing suffering as suffering and removing the wrong belief that clinging to anything will bring happiness. When we see clearly thus, there will be nothing that can bring us suffering – we will have conquered suffering with wisdom alone, as the Buddha taught.

All objects of the senses are a source of suffering for us if we cling to them. Many people, however, become indignant

when they hear such a teaching. To many, the idea of letting go of the objects of clinging and attachment is terrifying as they feel that if they let go they will lose the happiness they have worked so hard to gain. It is precisely such terror, however, that show the truth of the Buddha's teaching, illustrating as it does how the threat of losing the objects of one's attachment leads one directly to suffering and distress.

In order to cultivate and maintain the objects of our desire, we must engage in endless labour to acquire them and, worse, must protect them jealously against danger from thieves, villains, and natural and unnatural disasters. Whenever we let down our guard in the slightest, we risk the loss of something cherished, something on which our happiness depends. In fact, even with the best of our efforts to guard and collect pleasant experiences, we must inevitably part with all that is dear to us, leaving nothing we can truly call our own apart from our eternally unsatisfiable desire.

The people, places and things we cling to as bringing us happiness are undeniably the very cause for all of our fear, worry, stress, lamentation and despair. While we are in contact with the beloved, we build up greater and greater attachment and strive harder and harder for more and more contact with them until we are inevitably forced to come to terms with our attachments when we lose what is dear to us. For some, it is this loss that leads them to question their belief in the merit of craving and clinging and decide to find a better means of seeking happiness. Some are not so lucky, dying in great anguish and despair due to never having come to terms with their attachments. Unable to see the truth of reality, such people are unable to end their lives in peace and are liable to continue their suffering after death, based on the power of their dissatisfaction.

Undeniably, the Buddha's path is a radical departure from how most people live their lives. Often, the first thing a new meditator realizes from their practice is the immensity of the challenge in just seeing things as they are, due to the profound shift in outlook it requires. One who has never paid much attention to their mental well-being will live their life treating the mind much like a garbage dump, piling on more

and more rubbish until it all begins to spill out in the form of evil thoughts, speech and deeds. New meditators are forced to see for the first time what all their craving and aversion have done to them, and they begin to realize for the first time why, in their endless pursuit for happiness, they never were truly happy for more than the briefest of moments.

If one is wise, one will surely take such a realization as a blessing and make a steadfast effort to root out all of the unwholesome tendencies in one's mind. It is important for new meditators to understand how seeing the nature of suffering and its cause clearly in this way is actually to their greatest benefit, otherwise they may become discouraged, afraid to look closer at that which they have avoided for so long – their own mind.

Once we understand reality as it is, we will accept it as it is. We won't wish for things to be other than what they are, for we will understand that such wishing is utterly useless. Once we see that the objects of our experience cannot possibly bring us true and lasting satisfaction no matter what we do, we will give up any concern for their appearance or disappearance, and live our lives in peace, happiness and freedom from suffering at all times, in any situation whatsoever. Once we are able to experience the full spectrum of reality objectively, without categorizing our experiences as good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, then no experience will have the power to cause us even the smallest discomfort.

The most direct method for seeing things as they are is taught by the Buddha in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), as in:

'gacchanto vā gacchāmīti pajānāti'

"When walking, one fully comprehends: 'I am walking'."

When something arises, we observe it objectively, seeing it for what it is, simply reminding ourselves in an objective manner that "it is what it is". For example, when we feel pain, we simply remind ourselves that it is pain; not good, not bad, not me, not mine, simply "pain". This is the

teaching that the Buddha advised in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta:

> *“dukkhaṃ vā vedanaṃ vedayamāno ‘dukkhaṃ vedanaṃ vedayāmī’ti pajānāti”*
>
> “When feeling a painful feeling, one knows clearly, ‘I feel a painful feeling.’”

We instruct meditators to remind themselves, “pain, pain, pain” for as long as the pain stays, as this will serve to inhibit judgement and disliking from colouring one’s perception. When one is clearly aware of the pain as simply “pain”, the aversion to the pain will be replaced with simple understanding of it as it is – pain and nothing more.

When thinking pleasant or unpleasant thoughts, we instruct meditators to simply recognize them as “thinking”. When moving the body – standing up, walking, sitting or lying down, even with the rising and falling of abdomen during breath, meditators are taught to simply remind themselves of the movements as they are, using a word or mantra to focus the mind on the essence of the experience. When you like or dislike something, you can remind yourself, “liking”, or “disliking”. When you feel tired, bored, worried, scared, confused or whatever, you can conquer the emotion in an instant if you can simply remind yourself of the essence of it, as “tired”, “bored”, etc. Simply looking at each state – mental, physical or emotional, and seeing it for what it really is, nothing more, nothing less, not judging it, but coming to understand clearly that it is no more than an existential phenomenon that arises out of nothing and ceases without remainder, is enough to free one from the power of all addiction and aversion, all suffering and stress.

Once one sees reality for what it is, recognizing what are the causes and what the effects, one will quickly clear out all garbage from one’s mind, all of the bad habits and behaviour from one’s being, recognizing for oneself that they lead only to one’s suffering. Intellectual knowledge can never do this for you; if you do not show yourself the truth through meditation practice, it will ever be mere belief with no lasting benefit.

Seeing things as they are is the first method the Buddha taught for the removal of taints. In theory, this method is enough to remove all unwholesomeness from the mind; the problem, as stated, is that meditation is not the only aspect of our lives; we must guard our practice from dangers and distractions of many kinds that come about as a result of the complexity of life. For this reason, there are six further aspects of practice that need to be cultivated by an aspiring meditator.

Guarding

The second aspect one must cultivate is self-restraint. Some taints, some defilements of mind, can be conquered only by restraining oneself, guarding one's senses – the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body and the heart. While ultimately the goal is to be able to open the senses and view all sensual objects simply as they are, it will not be possible to do so if one simply lets everything in at once. For a beginner meditator, when a pleasant object arises, craving will easily overpower their ability to recognize the object for what it is, and they will lose themselves in fantasy and desire, abandoning the present moment and the meditation practice. When one experiences something unpleasant, if one's meditation practice is not mature, one will likewise be overwhelmed by defilements, quickly becoming frustrated and upset, losing one's clear awareness just the same.

Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling and thinking – the whole of the universe is in these six experiences. If we can only come to understand them as they are, we will understand the whole of reality. The profundity of this fact alone should engender caution and respect for the task at hand. One may very well ask, if there is nothing more to be done than see things as they are, why have we not already attained enlightenment? We see, hear, feel and think constantly throughout our lives. What is it that has stopped us from seeing clearly all this time? It is precisely our lack of restraint and care in relating to these realities that stops us from seeing them clearly, and this is why restraint is so important.

Rather than relating to experience objectively, we tend to

immediately judge and react to just about everything we experience. Pleasant experiences lead us to chase after them, unpleasant experiences lead us to become angry and upset. Both cause us to lose sight of the essence of the experience. For this reason, the Buddha taught that it is important for us to guard our senses carefully, only letting experiences in one-by-one, in a way that allows us see them as they are. A dedicated meditator should avoid sights, sounds, smells and tastes that one knows will give rise to lust and anger, only letting them in one by one, and only when one is well-guarded and ready to see them as they are. In order to progress in the practice, we must keep ourselves from indulging in pleasure or displeasure that will dull and weaken the mind, rendering it impotent in the cultivation of insight.

The Buddha likened sensual addiction to the sap in green wood that renders it unfit for lighting on fire. Only wood that is well-dried with all the sap removed can be lit and provide heat and light – which can be understood as metaphors for goodness and wisdom. When the mind is full of greed, anger and delusion, clear vision of things as they are is impossible and true goodness and wisdom are thus unattainable. For this reason, we must guard our senses day and night, not letting in the slightest thing that would take us off-guard and cause our minds to become sodden with defilements.

It is easy to see how cluttered one's mind becomes after many years of leaving one's senses unguarded, greedily devouring every sense pleasure one can find, never finding peace, never satiating the terrible masters of greed and aversion. New meditators will often lament that they were unaware of how sensitive the mind really is to experience. Had they known, they would have done more to guard their senses, indulging only in those activities that were conducive to true peace and contentment. For this reason, we encourage sense-restraint for everyone, even those living ordinary lives outside of a monastery or meditation centre.

Walking down the street, for example, one should imitate the behaviour of the Buddha himself, not letting oneself become distracted by the many exciting, stimulating things around, focusing instead on the single activity of walking. The

Buddha is said to have had a peculiar habit called the elephant's gaze; instead of turning his head to look at something, he would, like an elephant, turn his whole body, giving the object his full attention. If we wish to follow in the Buddha's footsteps, we should always strive to give our full attention to one thing at a time, rather than seeking to take in everything at once. At the very least, taking in too many things at once will cause undue mental distraction, leading us to lose our focus on the reality of our experience. While it is true that ephemeral pleasure can be gained from seeking out pleasant objects of the sense, such seeking is antithetical to the attainment of true happiness. One should ask oneself: if I am truly happy, for what reason must I seek pleasure?

If we wish to find true happiness, we should strive to focus on what we are doing in every aspect of our everyday lives, rather than dreaming about what we would rather be doing, or what others are doing in the world around us. Rather than trying to find happiness in what we don't have, which only leads us to develop habits of seeking, chasing, craving and clinging, we should try to find happiness with what we do have, so that we can be happy at any time, place, or circumstance. We should remember this in our daily lives and throughout our practice as Buddhist meditators, knowing that every sense pleasure we indulge in and every aversion we allow ourselves to cultivate will contribute to the soiling of the mind, rendering the cultivation of insight that much more difficult.

Guarding the senses is something we should take seriously. When we walk, we should focus on walking; when we stand, sit or lie down, we should likewise try to focus on that activity without letting our minds wander. Whatever we do during that day – speak, listen, work, drive, eat, drink, shower, even urinate and defecate, we should focus on what we are doing, not letting ourselves become distracted by what is being done around us. A person who guards their mind in this way will find themselves refreshed and alert, free from the exhaustion that besets one whose mind is given free reign to indulge in the objects of the sense – enslaved, rather, to the terrible masters of desire and aversion.

If we want to remain free from slavery to our wants and needs, we should try our best to limit entertainment and diversion and be content with a simple, peaceful life that is conducive to mental calm and insight. In order to progress towards true freedom, we must guard our minds at all times, letting in only the bare minimum of experience necessary at any given moment in order to facilitate the development of clear vision and wisdom. Once we have developed wisdom to see things as they are, such guarding will no longer be necessary; while we are still training, however, it must be seen as an essential aspect of our practice, until wisdom allows us to break free from the delusion that is the root cause of desire and aversion, and therefore suffering.

Using

The third method by which to give up the taints is in making use of possessions – the material objects we partake of as a means of sustaining life. A Buddhist meditator should be content with the bare necessities of life; they should be able to see the difference between something that is useful and something that is merely desired. They should recognize the impossibility of satisfying one's cravings for sensual pleasure and the danger in indulgence, and content themselves with very little in the way of physical consumption.

One who wishes to find true peace and simplicity must dedicate themselves to a simple and peaceful life, giving up luxury and the incessant pursuit of sensual pleasures. A meditator who is intent upon clear realization of the truth of reality must do their best to give up unnecessary possessions and indulgences, and learn to make use of their possessions in such a way as to avoid stimulation of craving and clinging.

The Buddha points out the fact, of course, that we cannot do away with physical possessions entirely – without food, for example, it will be impossible for us to carry out meditation for very long at all. Without sufficient clothing or lodging, our minds will be constantly distracted by the discomfort caused by the lack of protection. Without medicine when we are sick, our minds will be distracted by the intense suffering and disturbance of the illness.

We should not, therefore, think it wise to go entirely without these necessities of life. Nevertheless, even they may become hindrances on the path if we overindulge in them. Recognizing the fact that they are necessary, the Buddha pointed out the importance of proper use of the requisites; neither over-indulging nor forbearing to an excess. We must be mindful in our use of clothing, food, lodging and medicines, and try our best to limit our possessions to only those things that are necessary for living our lives in peace and comfort.

The Buddha laid out very specific guidelines on how to make use of one's possessions simply for their purpose. He taught that when we make use of something, we should reflect on its proper use, that we may use it only as appropriate. Reflecting with wisdom on our reasons for using our necessities of life, we come to distinguish between those things that are truly necessary and those that are merely indulgences. We also train ourselves in making proper use of those material requisites that are truly necessary, not indulging in excess even in regards to them.

The first requisite we should reflect upon is our clothing. We should remind ourselves that we wear clothing simply for the purpose of covering our bodies and nothing more. When we recognize this as the sole purpose of clothing ourselves, then the clothes we wear will reflect this recognition, and our state of mind will remain clear and at ease. If, on the other hand, we think of clothes as for the purpose of sensual attraction, we will seek out clothes that make us attractive to others and our minds will be full of anxiety and stress in finding the perfect outfit, driven to distraction by the pleasure and conceit that comes from wearing beautiful clothing.

If we are not careful in keeping to the proper use of clothing, it will become a hindrance in our practice, leading us to craving, clinging, attachment and suffering, making practice of the Buddha's teaching all the more difficult. If on the other hand we make use of clothing simply to cover the nakedness of the body, to keep ourselves warm or cool, to protect it from the sun, to protect it from the wind, to protect it from insects, mosquitoes and so on, then it can even serve

to support one's practice, protecting one from dangers both physical and mental.

The second requisite we should consider is food. Our food should also be useful, we should use food to remove the hunger, and eat those foods that will not give us indigestion. We should train ourselves to eat just the right amount so that we don't feel bloated and yet are free from hunger. If we are mindful of when we have eaten enough, we can stop before we overeat and our meditation will proceed unhindered as a result.

Improper use of food is indeed a great danger to dhamma practice. There is a story of how King Pasenadi once came to listen to a talk given by the Buddha but was unable to focus on the Buddha's words due to having eaten an immense amount of rice and curry just prior to his visit. The Buddha, commenting on the benefits of moderation, recited the following verses:

"manujassa sadā satīmato,
mattaṃ jānato laddhabhojane.
tanukassa bhavanti vedanā,
saṇikaṃ jīrati āyupālayan"ti

"For one born human who is always mindful,
knowing moderation in both food and gain,
his suffering is lessened
and he ages slowly, guarding his longevity."

– SN 3.13

The king was impressed by these words and had his nephew learn them by heart and remind him of them every time the king ate. As a result, he was able to cut down his intake of food to a more moderate amount.

New meditators will be able to sympathize with the king while they learn to moderate their intake of food; they will find that while they are still unable to measure the proper amount, that they are subject to drowsiness when they overeat and fatigue when they under-eat. They are therefore encouraged to remind themselves every time they

eat to do so meditatively, recognizing each experience objectively, that they may be clearly aware of their state of hunger, paying more attention to fulfilling the needs of the body than the desires of the mind.

Food plays an important role in our lives as Buddhist meditators; if we let our intake be guided by our tongue rather than our stomach, we will inevitably suffer both from the immediate effects of overeating and the long-term effects of disease. If we wish to progress quickly along the path, we must control our appetites, eating only once or twice per day during intensive meditation periods and only as much as is necessary to function in other circumstances.

We should also be mindful of the quality of our food. If we follow our tongues, we will eat food that is harmful to the body, while shunning food that is beneficial; we will cultivate both physical discomfort and mental discontent. It even happens sometimes that a meditator is unable to continue a meditation course because of their craving for things like delicious food. Such is the danger of attachment.

The third requisite is lodging. A proper dwelling place can have great benefit for a meditator; the Buddha extolled the virtues of a dwelling place in the Vinaya Piṭaka:

> *"sītaṃ uṇhaṃ paṭihanti, tato vāḷamigāni ca.*
> *sarīsape ca makase, sisire cāpi vuṭṭhiyo.*
> *tato vātātapo ghore, sañjāto paṭihaññati.*
> *leṇatthañca sukhatthañca, jhāyituñca vipassituṃ."*
>
> "It wards off cold and heat, and beasts and creatures besides;
> reptiles too, and mosquitoes, and indeed the winter rains.
> Moreover, the most terrible wind and heat is vanquished as it arises.
> It is for the purpose of seclusion and the purpose of happiness; to meditate and to see clearly."
>
> – Cv 6.1

If we make use of a dwelling place for these purposes, it will certainly be a boon for us in our practice. It is common,

however, for people to possess dwellings that are totally unsuitable for the practice of meditation; large, luxurious houses with soft beds and seats and attractive sights in every room. We fill our dwellings with things that distract our attention, and so it is no wonder that we tend to have difficulty meditating at home, with a wide-screen television in one room, a surround-sound stereo system in another, paintings on every wall, and so on.

If our intention is to cultivate inner peace and understanding, we must devote ourselves to looking inwards. Every distraction that pulls us outwards will only serve to hinder our inner development. We must therefore be careful to choose an environment that serves to calm and stabilize our mind, rather than excite and distract it.

If possible, we should choose a simple dwelling place that is suitable for the practice of meditation, giving up luxury and comfort. If this is not possible, we should at least try to set up our living environment as best we can to support our practice. Soft, comfortable bedding, for example, may be eschewed for a simple mat on the floor, with the knowledge that the former may cause us to over-sleep, becoming lazy and indulgent.

Bedding and lodging should be for the purpose of seclusion and safety. It should be a place where we can carry out our meditation practice undisturbed by people and by nature, rather than a place where we can indulge in unwholesome clinging and craving. We should arrange our dwelling so that we have room to walk and a place to sit, and so that there is nothing distracting our attention from the practice. In this way, lodging can be a support for our practice, rather than a hindrance.

The fourth requisite is medicine. Medicine is important to help ward off sickness and the debilitating effects of sickness on the body, which can become a hindrance to the practice as well. Over-reliance on medicine (and especially medication), however, can have a profoundly negative effect on our minds, cultivating aversion to pain and discomfort, preventing us from having to face the difficulty posed by sickness.

Disease is an inevitable part of life. No one can finish their life without succumbing to deadly sickness of some sort, unless they die by some more unnatural means. Recognizing sickness as a fact of life, we should be careful not to become dependent on medicines as a means of curing all of our suffering. In the end, medicine alone will not be enough to achieve that goal.

The Buddha taught four kinds of suffering: dukkha-vedanā, dukkha-sabhāva, dukkha-lakkhaṇa, and dukkha-sacca. Dukkha-vedanā is suffering as a feeling. This is how most people understand suffering, and so they think that by simply avoiding painful, unpleasant feelings they can be free from suffering. Such people tend to live in great fear of sickness and are quick to seek out medicine, medication and even drugs to solve all of their physical ailments.

Dukkha-sabhāva means suffering as an existential reality. It means suffering is a part of life, something that cannot be avoided. Old age and death cannot be avoided; hunger, thirst, the need to urinate and defecate likewise cannot be avoided by anyone. A person who realizes this will tend to shy away from medicine as a cure to suffering and try instead to find a more comprehensive solution. This sort of person is naturally inclined towards meditation.

Dukkha-lakkhaṇa means suffering as an inherent characteristic of all arisen phenomena. Even pleasant experiences are unstable, uncertain, and therefore unsatisfying. Knowledge of this sort is true wisdom that can only come from meditation practice; it is outside of the realm of non-meditative understanding.

When a person tries to meditate for the first time, they will generally make an attempt to force their meditation to become stable, satisfying, and controllable. As they progress, however, they will come to see that nothing they experience is any of these things. They may even give up meditation entirely, thinking that it is the meditation itself that is responsible for the unsatisfactory state of affairs, instead of accepting the truth that all experience is impermanent, unsatisfying, and uncontrollable. Actually, it is not difficult to understand intellectually how nothing lasts for more than an instant, is therefore unable to satisfy, and thus

clearly uncontrollable – it is merely our defilements of mind that confuse us into expecting things to be otherwise.

Once one is able to appreciate the inherent characteristic of suffering (i.e. inability to satisfy) in everything that arises, one will begin to let go of one's craving for all things, preferring simply to watch and experience rather than react and control. Eventually, this becomes a habit and one makes a shift in one's understanding with the sudden realization that everything whatsoever that arises has no ability to satisfy oneself. This is called dukkha-sacca – the truth of suffering.

A person who sees the truth of suffering for themselves is one who is free from suffering. They feel no displeasure at painful feelings; they are eternally at peace with themselves in all situations, because they have no misplaced expectations about how reality "should" be. They accept reality as it is, knowing that it could not possibly have been otherwise than it is. They seek out no satisfaction in health and well-being, so they find no reason to obsess about poor health and sickness. An enlightened being sees the body as something to care for appropriately as a matter of course, but is not at all concerned with its eventual fate.

If we obsess over anything, it will surely become a cause for great suffering for us. The body is something that most people are guilty of obsessing over to a great degree. Some people will actually go to the extent of having plastic surgery to make their body more satisfying to their minds. Others become addicted to pain-killers, seeking out stronger and stronger medication until finally they may commit suicide because they are unable to take the pain.

As Buddhist meditators who have come to appreciate the horror of addiction and obsession, we should take the Buddha's advice seriously and use medicine only as is absolutely necessary to avoid debilitating sickness and disease that would otherwise hinder our ability to carry out objective observation of reality. As my teacher often reminds us, "you will sacrifice your wealth to save your body; you will sacrifice your body to save your life; you should therefore be willing to sacrifice your wealth, your body, and even your life to save your mind."

Besides these four requisites, we should understand the Buddha's advice as applying to all of our possessions. Whatever material objects we make use of, they should be only for the purpose of carrying out our lives in a way that leads us closer to understanding the truth; we should shun possessions that possess us – those things that lead us further from realizing the truth, catching us up instead in the cycle of craving, addiction and suffering.

All of the many tools we use, cars, telephones, computers and so on, are for some purpose. It is the purpose of each of them that should be reflected upon as a matter of course. What is the purpose of this object? Is it essential? Does its purpose lead me closer to enlightenment, or at least complement my practice? Or is it contradictory towards the aim that I am trying to reach and therefore a hindrance to my spiritual development?

There is no need to do away with all of our possessions, especially those that help us maintain proper livelihood. We must make use of those things that support us in the physical realm, but we must use them in the right way. Proper use of material requisites is the third way by which we do away with our defilements, and thus it is another important part of the comprehensive practice.

Bearing

The fourth aspect of practice is in patiently bearing with those things that are unpleasant or difficult to bear. Certain experiences we meet with both in our practice and in our lives will be difficult to endure patiently; the natural tendency will be to avoid them at all cost. Heat, cold, hunger, thirst, even painful feelings that seem liable to take our lives away; all of these the Buddha said we must train ourselves to endure.

Certainly, everyone in the world wishes to be happy and avoid suffering at all cost. Unfortunately, it is never possible to completely escape unpleasant situations. A person who is constantly running away from unpleasantness, a slave to their partiality, will have little chance of attaining true peace in the face of these experiences. "Khanti paramaṃ tapo

tiṭṭhikā" – "patience, forbearance, is the highest austerity (Dhp. 184)." Learning to interact objectively with reality rather than react based on partiality is the most difficult, yet most rewarding practice that there is. The Buddha made clear with his teachings that true understanding of reality can only come if we are able to endure difficulty rather than running from it.

The point is that a person who runs away from difficulty will become a person who does so habitually. Rather than looking closer to understand a situation clearly, whereby they would be able to see that every situation is nothing more than moment-to-moment experiences that are neither difficult nor dangerous, they will automatically deny the validity of the experience, compartmentalizing it as "unacceptable" as opposed to "acceptable".

When one realizes that there is nothing to be gained from constantly running from difficulty, one will be forced to accept the only alternative and develop patience. Patience is what allows us to examine our problems objectively; it is thus what allows us to find true solutions to them. If one is never patient enough to examine one's problems in detail, one will never see the truth about them.

Again, our ultimate goal is to see things clearly. In many cases all that is stopping us from seeing an experience clearly is the intensity of it, and our inability to bear with it long enough to see it for what it is. Teaching ourselves to bear with difficulty allows us to incorporate such experiences into our practice and come to see them clearly.

If we are patient, bearing with any discomfort that arises, we will find our minds opening up to a new realm of happiness and peace; we will find ourselves able to find comfort where there was before only suffering and stress. Without the cultivation of patience, experiences of heat, cold, hunger, thirst, painful feelings, or any uncomfortable experience would immediately lead to feelings of great distress and anxiety; as a result, we would be plagued by great suffering throughout our lives. Once we are actually able to face these experiences, coming to see them simply as phenomena that arise of their own accord and disappear without our consent, the self-identification and judgement

will disappear and with them so will the stress and suffering.

When we are brave enough to face our worst fears, we will come to see that there's nothing to fear at all, that the most horrific experience is still just an experience. As a result, there will be no experience that can cause us any suffering whatsoever. Patience is thus another important part of our practice, especially in terms of understanding the nature of proper meditation practice.

People often misunderstand meditation practice as being a pleasurable experience, wherein one is able to escape all of one's problems. Meditation, it is thought, must be pleasant, stable, and calming at all times, free from difficulty and disturbance. When pain arises in meditation or when something comes to disturb one's state of mind, a common assumption is that something is wrong and that one must find a way to "fix" the situation so it becomes pleasant and agreeable again.

All physical ailments – heat, cold, hunger, thirst, and even the most excruciating physical discomfort – are simply physical realities. They don't have any bearing on one's state of mind, and so they need not necessarily cause suffering if one is clearly aware of them as they are. Often, it is by facing such difficulties that true insight can arise.

A well-known Buddhist story is taught in the Satipaṭṭhana Sutta commentary about a monk named Tissa who left home as a rich man, relinquishing all of his wealth to his younger brother and ordaining under the Buddha to practice meditation in the forest. His younger brother's wife, however, was so intoxicated by her new-found wealth that she became obsessed with the fear that the elder brother might return to reclaim it should he later find life as a monk unsatisfying.

In order to prevent such an event from occurring, she resorted to hiring a group of mercenaries to seek out Venerable Tissa and murder him in the forest. The villains she hired found Tissa meditating under a tree and told him of their aim. Tissa asked them to return in the morning, since he was engaged in intensive meditation and hoped at least to be able to practice one more night before being forced to

end his practice forever.

The mercenaries refused, saying there was no way they could ensure that he wouldn't run away. Tissa responded by picking up a large rock and breaking both of his legs where he sat. He asked them if this was insurance enough, and they acquiesced, most likely in shock and awe at his courage.

Tissa spent the entire night contemplating the pain and when dawn broke he had become enlightened. People without experience in insight meditation practice can't understand how such a thing is possible – first to break one's own legs in order to be able to continue practice and second to become enlightened while under such excruciating pain. Here is what Tissa himself had to say, as recorded in the commentaries:

> *"ubho pādāni bhinditvā, saññapessāmi vo ahaṃ.*
> *aṭṭiyāmi harāyāmi, sarāgamaraṇaṃ ahaṃ.*
> *evāhaṃ cintayitvāna, yathābhūtaṃ vipassisaṃ.*
> *sampatte aruṇuggamhi, arahattamapāpuṇiṅti.*
>
> "'Breaking both legs, I will make you believe me;
> Vexed, ashamed am I of a death with lust.'
> Thinking in this way, I came to clearly see reality.
> At the arrival of sunrise, sainthood I attained."
>
> – MN-a 10.2

Often it is only through adversity that we can cultivate the necessary mental fortitude to change our habits of clinging and craving. If one is constantly engaged in running away from certain experiences and clinging to others, one's mind will never become settled enough to see things as they are. Likewise, if one is confronted only by pleasant experiences, never experiencing anything that would challenge one's state of well-being, one will see no disadvantage in clinging to pleasant objects, cultivating partiality without seeing the danger that lies therein.

The practice of Venerable Tissa is fully in line with the Buddha's teaching in the Sabbāsava Sutta, to bear with

suffering even to the point that it might take away one's life. If the only alternative is partiality, one had better save one's mind than let the mind go to waste in favour of this decaying husk of a body.

If one is constantly running away from one's ailments, one will never fully open up to objective reality and one's practice will never succeed. In our practice of the Buddha's teaching, we should strive to be open to even unpleasant situations, trying to simply see them for what they are instead of judging them as good or bad, me or mine. This is the fourth aspect of a comprehensive Buddhist practice.

Avoiding

The fifth aspect of practice is in regards to avoiding. Whereas most phenomena must be endured, there are indeed certain experiences that must be avoided. We can see from this that the Buddha did not require us to bear with every experience like an ordinary animal without any sense of judgement or reason.

The Buddha gives an example of a monk walking through the forest who comes upon a thorn bush blocking the path. If we were to believe that we must bear with every experience, never avoiding anything, one might think it advisable for the monk to walk right through the thorn bush and bear with the suffering and inconvenience that followed. The Buddha explained, however, that this is an example of something that should indeed be avoided as a matter of course.

If one comes upon a pitfall of any sort and one can just go around it, one should do the obvious thing and avoid it. Wild beasts, natural or unnatural disasters, dangerous situations, just about anything that poses a sincere danger to one's life and limb, one should not think, "my karma will take care of me and if I'm meant to be killed, then let me be killed." One's life and physical well-being should indeed be guarded in such circumstances, rather than blindly trusting in one's past good deeds or good luck to protect oneself.

One must be able to judge every situation carefully and decide wisely on the proper course of action. Certain experiences are unavoidable and some are harmless but

unpleasant. Certain situations are neither unavoidable nor harmless and, whether they be pleasant or unpleasant, such situations should be avoided at all cost.

An example that bears specific mention is in regards to people and situations that cause the arising of further defilement to the mind when we come in contact with them. Far greater than any danger to life and limb is the danger to our minds and so these should be avoided all the more.

We should avoid immoral social situations like bars, night clubs and drinking parties, for example, as well as people who engage habitually in drugs, alcohol and all sorts of sensuality. We should try our best to avoid people who by their very way of life are likely to be a cause for us to fall into immorality by associating with them.

We should avoid all things that are liable to endanger our practice, either physically or mentally. It is often the case that extended practice of meditation will force people to change their lives in many ways, changing their circle of friends, their lifestyle, and even their habits and routines. They will change naturally because they begin to see what is helpful and what is harmful, and so they will begin to avoid those things that are harmful to one's spiritual development and peace of mind.

During intensive meditation practice, it is advisable to seclude oneself, staying away from people and things that will excite the mind; staying away from pleasant sights, sounds, and other experiences. If it is not possible to seclude oneself completely, one must at least avoid those activities that are sure to distract and defile the mind. We must strive to give up activities like watching movies, listening to music, and indulging in all kinds of entertainment, because without a doubt they will take away our mindfulness, taking us away from our practice.

One should never think it wise to bear with anything that is genuinely detrimental to one's well-being, even in regards to people whom one has come to see as a friend, if they are set on a wrong course of action. Often the people and places we are most familiar with are cause for the greatest disturbance to our minds, since we tend to choose them based, not on

wisdom and understanding, but partiality and delusion.

The Buddha was clear on this point – we should even avoid excessive contact with good friends and companions in the spiritual path in favour of our own spiritual development, as exemplified by the story of Attadattha Thera, a monk in the time of the Buddha.

It is said that when the Buddha announced his final passing away four months before, those monks who were still not free from mental defilement were at a loss as to what to do and went around fretting and worrying and speculating about the impending loss of their great teacher.

One monk, however, thought to himself, “here our wise and enlightened teacher is about to pass away forever and I myself am still not free from craving!” It were better, he thought, to strive ardent and alone to attain enlightenment before the Buddha passed away.

As a result, he avoided his companions in the holy life at all cost, dedicating himself to intensive meditation practice in solitude. The other monks, becoming aware of his unwillingness to engage in conversation or express concern about the Buddha’s passing, confronted him and brought him before the Buddha.

When the Buddha heard their complaint, he said that all monks should strive to be like Attadattha who, knowing what was in his best interest, took it upon himself to seek it out at all cost. He then taught a verse that appears in the Dhammapada:

> *“attadatthaṃ paratthena, bahunāpi na hāpaye.*
> *attadatthamabhiññāya, sadatthapasuto siyā”ti.*
>
> “Not for the benefit of another should one sacrifice one’s own benefit, no matter it be great.
> Clearly knowing what is of benefit to one’s self, one should set oneself intently upon attaining that benefit.”
>
> – Dhp. 166

Even contact with true friends should be limited to what is

truly beneficial – how much more so those who are enemies in disguise? If one comes to know that a friend is set upon the wrong path, one should consider whether they are amenable to advice and capable of change or not. If they are, one should support them by leading them towards what is good and right; if they are not, they should be avoided to the best of one's ability, just as one would keep a distance from someone with a communicable disease.

We should avoid those things that will harm or hinder our practice, and especially those that will endanger our lives or our ability to continue our practice in any way. This is the fifth aspect of a comprehensive practice.

Abandoning

The sixth aspect of practice is abandoning. Finally, after explaining all of the things that need to be seen, guarded, used, born, and even avoided, the Buddha explains what must be abandoned. Buddhism teaches that all unskillful tendencies of mind must be given up for one to find true happiness and peace. In particular, this aspect of practice refers to the dispelling of unwholesome mind states as they arise, rather than giving heed to them.

It is not proper to think that one can simply sit still with eyes closed and claim to be meditating. It is not true that all states of mind are equal, all emotions equally valid. While one can harbour beliefs of this sort, in practice it is undeniable that certain mental activities lead only to further craving, clinging, suffering and disappointment. Such mental states should be given up even by a beginner meditator after making a firm resolution in one's mind to pay them no heed, approaching them as just one more object of practice to recognize objectively and let go.

People who have never engaged in meditation practice tend to think that mind states like lust, pride, worry, doubt, even anger and hatred, can be useful and beneficial. They think that without these states one would be unable to obtain and possess the objects of one's desire or ward off and dispel objects of one's displeasure. The critical philosopher will notice that this is actually begging the question, i.e., the

premise (that such mind states allow one to cling and reject) requires the conclusion (that clinging and rejection are good) for it to have any meaning. In truth, it is not enough to say that something allows us to fulfil our desires; we must be certain that our desires, once fulfilled, will truly bring us peace and happiness. If they won't, we must reject them outright if we are to be true to our goal.

A meditator must make an ardent effort to do away with thoughts based on desire, ill-will, or delusion when they arise. Thoughts regarding sensual pleasure will only serve to sodden the mind if pursued; thoughts of anger will cause the mind to boil over like a pot of water over a fire, and delusion will cloud the mind like a room full of smoke. We must be quick to recognize such thoughts as they arise and grasp them objectively, rather than identifying with or clinging to them.

When we engage in fantasizing about things like romance, adventure, society, even food and possessions, it can bring great pleasure while we pursue the fantasy. Only once our mind becomes tired and worn out from the excessive mental activity will we realize how taxing it is on the system, and only over time will we gradually come to see how we have become addicted to illusion, preferring it over reality and falling into deeper and deeper depression whenever we are forced to face the imperfect reality around us. True happiness can only come in relation to what is real; fantasy and illusion dry up the mind like freshly cut grass, as the Buddha explained to a certain angel in the Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN 1.10). The angel, seeing the monks living in great austerity and yet appearing to be quite happy and content, asked:

> *"araññe viharantānaṃ, santānaṃ brahmacārinaṃ.*
> *ekabhattaṃ bhuñjamānānaṃ, kena vaṇṇo pasīdatī"ti.*
>
> "For those in forests dwelling, peaceful ones living a life sublime,
> eating only a single meal, how does their colour shine?"

It seems that this angel had spent some time watching the monks meditate in the forest, and noticed how when they

entered into absorption, their complexion became quite bright. Wondering how this could be possible without sensual enjoyment to keep them satisfied, the angel came to ask this question of the Buddha.

It is understandable that the angel should be so puzzled, being surrounded by sensual pleasure at all times such as human beings can only dream of. The thought of being without such pleasure must have been horrifying to the angel, who would have thought it impossible to be at ease without them, let alone appear as radiant as the monks did under the austere circumstances of their monastic life.

The commentary explains the monks' radiance in technical terms, as:

> *"citte pasanne lohitaṃ pasīdati, cittasamuṭṭhānāni upādārūpāni parisuddhāni honti."*
>
> "When the mind is clear, the blood becomes clear and derived matter that is dependent on the mind becomes purified."

While such an explanation is perfectly valid, the Buddha offered a more poetic explanation to the angel, with the following verses:

> *"atītaṃ nānusocanti, nappajappanti nāgataṃ.*
> *paccuppannena yāpenti, tena vaṇṇo pasīdati".*
>
> "For the past they do not mourn, nor for the future pine;
> they are nourished by the present, so does their colour shine."
>
> *"anāgatappajappāya, atītassānusocanā.*
> *etena bālā sussanti, naḷova harito luto"ti.*
>
> "In pining for the future, or over the past forlorn,
> by this do fools wither up, just as green reeds once shorn."

If we are able to let go of illusion and learn to find peace in

what is real, here and now, we can be happy in any situation.

When we engage in anger and hatred, we may likewise feel a sort of pleasure in the adrenaline rush that comes from thoughts of violence and conflict. This pleasure blinds us to the fact that we are destroying ourselves from within, burning up with anger and aversion, becoming habitual in our reactions to negative stimuli. The Buddha once pointed out that when we are angry, we do to ourselves what our enemies could only wish, destroying both our physical and mental well-being to the delight of those who wish us harm.

Actually, both desire and aversion trigger chemical responses in the body, as do crying, laughing, and even yawning. It is therefore no wonder that such emotions are easily habit forming, causing both physical and mental addictions well-documented by experts in addiction research.

I once taught meditation to a professor at a large university in America whose main field of expertise was addiction. His interest was pertinent because he himself was on medication for obsessive-compulsive disorder. During our discussions he taught me many things about addiction, and I turned around and showed him how to use the Buddha's teaching to understand empirically all the things he taught me on an intellectual level. His wife later came to tell me that he had remarked to her after the course that "he is a genius!" I am not a genius, of course, but I think it is fair to say that the Buddha was, because he was able to see through mere belief and intellect to actually understand how reality worked on a practical level.

This professor was subject to fits of violence towards his family out of hyperbolic concern for their safety and well-being. Through the meditation practice, he was able to apply what he had studied for so many years to overcome his attachments to his own thoughts and emotions. In many cases this is the true problem – not that we are angry or lustful, but that we misapprehend the emotions, forgetting all that we have learned and observed in favour of blind addiction and belief that there is a never-before-attained satisfaction waiting just around the corner. As the famous quote goes, "insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

Delusion too can be incredibly intoxicating, blinding us as easily as greed or anger. One might say that greed and anger are in-and-of-themselves fairly benign; it is delusion-based mind states like self-righteousness and conceit that make them deadly, leading one to cultivate unwholesomeness and thinking it a virtue.

The Buddha said that he didn't see any evil greater than holding steadfastly to wrong views. Just as a person who cuts themselves on grass or leaves due to an improper grasp of them, a person with wrong view will fall into great suffering due to their ignorance.

When a person likes or dislikes something, there may still be room to understand the dangers in reacting to it; when one believes it proper to like, dislike and even react violently in response to one's partialities, this belief poses a much greater threat than any single emotion it might cultivate.

It is common in society for people to feel abused or mistreated by others and demand equal or even special treatment. We often rationalize our desires based on some perceived privilege we "deserve". In the same way, we tend to rationalize our aversions with self-righteous thinking, as in, "I don't deserve to be treated like that!" and so on. Such thoughts are only to our detriment, destroying respect and friendship and replacing it with fear and loathing.

A person who looks down upon others, expecting special treatment, demanding obedience or respect, will never truly be respected by anyone; they will only find themselves alienated from their fellow human beings as a result of their unpleasant behaviour. Likewise, a person who has low self-esteem will find themselves alienated through their clinging to thoughts of their own worthlessness. They will ever act in ways that are self-defeating and never succeed in accomplishing anything worthwhile including spiritual enlightenment.

All forms of self-appraisal are associated with attachment to self. We spend much of our time defining ourselves as some entity that we never experience but somehow imagine to be real and really "I". Because such an entity is fixed in our minds irrespective of reality, it can only serve to hinder our

investigation of the truth, giving us an atomic concept of ourselves, rather than one that can be broken down into what are really just impersonal, ephemeral experiences of no substance or significance whatsoever. In this way, we can see the danger of delusion towards our practice and our general state of well-being.

All sorts of negative mind states, when engaged in, will without question inhibit our ability to see clearly, and so should be shunned by ardent meditators, as per the Buddha's advice in the Sabbāsava Sutta. It is important to understand that this does not mean reacting negatively to them; rather it means recognizing them quickly for what they are and staying within the realm of what is real, forbidding our minds to wander off into illusion, fantasy and blindness.

All unwholesome thoughts should be carefully observed and neutralized with objective recognition, as in "liking, liking", "disliking, disliking", or even just "thinking, thinking". When we fantasize, we should recognize it as "fantasizing" or "dreaming". When we dwell on unpleasant thoughts or harmful intentions, we should recognize them similarly. And when delusion arises in the form of self-righteousness, we should be quick to see it too as just another thought, to be followed at one's own peril. This is what the Buddha meant by destroying or dispelling unwholesome thoughts.

Developing

The seventh and final aspect of practice by which we do away with the defilements that plague our minds, bringing us only stress and suffering as long as they persist, is through development. Specifically, the Buddha taught us to develop seven qualities in sequence, which he referred to as the seven factors of enlightenment (bojjhaṅga).

This aspect of practice is perhaps the most profound, as it defines the progression of practice from seeing things as they are to realizing true freedom from suffering. Through our practice of seeing the truth of all experience, we undergo a process of mental development that strengthens and fortifies our minds until we are finally able to break free from suffering and become enlightened for ourselves.

The first step in our progress, the first factor of enlightenment, is called “sati”. “sati” is a word that should be familiar to most Buddhists; unfortunately, however, it is often understood quite loosely, even incorrectly. Generally translated as “mindfulness”, it is usually taken to mean “awareness” or “alertness”, both of which are ostensibly positive qualities of mind. “sati”, however, means neither.

The word “sati” comes from a root (sara) that means to remember, or recollect. This root is used in the standard form of “going for refuge” to the Buddha, his teachings, and his enlightened disciples, for example: “buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi” – “I go to the Buddha as a saraṇa”. The word “saraṇa” is generally translated as “refuge”, which it can indeed mean. The word also means, however, “object of recollection”, i.e. something to recollect in times of difficulty.

Indeed, this is exactly what the Buddha encouraged us to do when we are in distress. He said, “maṃ anussareyyātha” – “you should recollect me”, because thoughts on the perfection of the Buddha would console us in times of despair. Similar practices exist in many of the world’s religions to bring faith and courage in times of difficulty – there is nothing particularly Buddhist about it.

From this explanation, though, we can see that the word “sati”, the very basis on which we are to build our practice, has something to do with calling to mind, or keeping in mind. The word sati is sometimes used to refer to recollecting events that have occurred in the past or foreseeing those that will happen in the future as well. In the context of the factors of enlightenment, however, it refers only to recollection of the present moment. What it really means is to call to mind the objective nature of the experience, eschewing all projection, extrapolation or judgement about the object.

According to the Abhidhamma, sati arises based on fortified recognition (thīra-saññā). Whereas ordinary recognition (saññā) is not enough to keep the mind in objective awareness, once we fortify or reaffirm this recognition, not letting the mind move beyond simple awareness of the object for what it is, our minds will penetrate the nature of the object to the core, dispelling all doubt as to its essential

nature as something worth clinging to or not.

“sati” would therefore be better translated as “recognition”, and this is how it has been referred to throughout this chapter. “sati”, in the context of the bojjhaṅgas is the deliberate and sustained recognition that allows one to see the objects of experience as they truly are.

This explanation, which may seem a bit dry to the casual reader, is necessary to help us understand what the Buddha really meant in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, when he said, as quoted earlier, “when walking, one fully comprehends: ‘I am walking’.” It is clear that he did not mean that we should be aware that we are walking, since awareness is common to animals and ordinary humans alike. Simply recognizing that we are walking requires no meditative training whatsoever.

To “fully comprehend” (pajānāti), one must cultivate the mental quality of “sati” or fortified recognition (thīra-saññā) by reminding oneself of the essential nature of the experience, as in “walking”. Reminding oneself in this way of what one already recognizes is equivalent to arresting the mind’s natural progression into projection, judgement, clinging, seeking, building up, and finally suffering.

Another way of understanding this activity of fortifying one’s recognition is as a mantra, a traditional meditative tool that has been used for millennia by meditators both Buddhist and non. A mantra is used to focus the mind on an object, arresting the mind’s natural inclination to jump from object to object. It is traditionally used to focus on a conceptual object, something a meditator conjures up in the mind – a picture or a spiritual object like a god or angel.

A mantra can, however, be used in much the same way in order to fix the mind on a real object as well, be it a physical sensation, a feeling, a thought, or an emotion. This is one way of understanding the word “sati” in the context of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta; it is the use of a mantra to stabilize and fortify one’s bare recognition of an experience for what it is, allowing one to see clearly without prejudice or projection and thus remove any misapprehensions based on delusion or ignorance.

Once we cultivate sati, our minds will naturally incline

towards observing the nature of phenomena; just as how a person who sees a tiger also sees its stripes, observation of the characteristics of every object of one's experience is unavoidable for one who observes the experience objectively in this way. Through the cultivation of sati, one will be forced to see clearly the true nature of everything one clings to, as well as the result of such clinging. One will see that the objects of experience are universally impermanent, unsatisfying, and uncontrollable; one will see that clinging to such entities is akin to banging one's head off of a wall – painful and utterly without purpose. This introspection-based knowledge is called "dhamma-vicaya", and it is the second of the factors of enlightenment we are trying to cultivate as a means of destroying the taints.

In the beginning, a meditator may spend much of their time practising incorrectly as they gradually teach themselves the delicacy of true introspection. When they are in pain, they may say to themselves, "pain, pain, pain", but neglect to put their attention on the pain itself – hoping irrationally that simply repeating the word is enough to make the pain go away.

Since the use of a mantra is to bring one's attention closer to the object, such effort cannot help but fail miserably. Such meditators may become miserable in response, feeling like the meditation is useless, and may give up meditation entirely. Only through proper understanding of the goal of meditation will they realize that the problem lies more in their unwillingness to investigate the pain than in the pain itself.

Once the meditator turns their mind towards understanding the object as it is, they will find themselves much invigorated by the practice, uplifted at having done away with aversion and attachment to the objects of experience. Given the heavy weight of the defilements, one's first experience of simply observing an object as it is and sticking with that observation can feel very much like one's first breath of fresh air after being trapped for many years in a dark and stagnant dungeon.

This invigoration is called "viriya", energy, and is the third factor of enlightenment that must be cultivated. This sort of

energy is not the same as pushing oneself to practice beyond one's limits or forcing the mind to stay with a single object; it is a natural result of seeing things as they are and cultivating one's vision to a greater and greater degree of clarity, which in turn frees the mind of the weights and chains of defilements.

It must be understood, however, that simply removing the defilements of greed, anger and even delusion from the mind is not enough; as long as there is still ignorance, the defilements may still arise again in full force if we let down our guard. For this reason, we must cultivate this process as a habit, carving out a familiarity with objective observation in the mind until we can truly internalize what we are observing.

Once our minds become accustomed to observing in this way, there will arise the fourth factor of enlightenment, called "pīti" or rapture. Rapture is a phenomenon well-known in religious circles, though they may have other names for it. It refers to any mental state that catches one up, holding one in its grasp, making it difficult to break away.

Ordinary rapture is found in the rocking back and forth that can be seen to occur in meditators and religious devotees of many religious traditions. They may believe that it is a god or spirit that has taken possession of them; in actual fact, it is simply a product of one's own habitual cultivation of a focused mind state, leading one to become stuck in the experience like a broken record.

In the context of the factors of enlightenment, rapture refers to the getting caught up by one's introspection, something akin to an airplane taking off. During its taxi on the runway, the airplane's travel is neither smooth nor steady. Once it reaches a critical velocity, however, it is lifted into the air and is able to travel smoothly without any obstacles.

Once one's practice becomes habitual through intensive dedication, usually over many days or weeks of intensive practice, one will begin to feel as though little or no conscious effort is required to maintain the objective awareness. Some meditators may actually become negligent as a result, failing to continue their efforts to

further refine their observation; they will then generally fall away from that state and have to begin again to cultivate the habit anew.

Just as a pilot must always be on the alert, adjusting the airplane's trajectory when necessary to keep it on course, so too a meditator whose practice is progressing smoothly must never fail to keep up the practice of objective observation. If they are diligent in this way, they will find their minds beginning to quiet down naturally, becoming more amenable to clear observation and recognition. This quietude of mind is called "passadhi", and it is the fifth factor of enlightenment.

With the cultivation of quietude, one's mind will become focused. As one continues to apply oneself to the meditation, the mind will no longer jump chaotically from one object to another, and one's observation will proceed with greater and greater ease as one's focus becomes further and further developed.

In the Visuddhimagga, this process is likened to the taming of a young calf:

> For this bhikkhu's mind has long been dissipated among visible data, etc., as its object, and it does not want to mount the object of concentration-through-mindfulness-of-breathing; it runs off the track like a chariot harnessed to a wild ox. Now, suppose a cowherd wanted to tame a wild calf that had been reared on a wild cow's milk, he would take it away from the cow and tie it up apart with a rope to a stout post dug into the ground; then the calf might dash to and fro, but being unable to get away, it would eventually sit down or lie down by the post. So too, when a bhikkhu wants to tame his own mind which has long been spoilt by being reared on visible data, etc., as object for its food and drink, he should take it away from visible data, etc., as object and bring it into the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty place and tie it up there to the post of in-breaths and out-breaths with the rope of mindfulness. And so his mind may then dash to and fro when it no longer gets the objects it was formerly used to, but being unable to break the rope of mindfulness and get away, it sits down, lies down, by that

object under the influence of access and absorption. Hence the Ancients said:

154. "Just as a man who tames a calf
Would tie it to a post, so here
Should his own mind by mindfulness
Be firmly to the object tied."

– Path of Purification VIII, 153-4

The "lying down" of the mind refers to the focus that comes from sustained practice. Such focus is called "samadhi", and it is the sixth factor of enlightenment.

With the development of proper insight, the mind will gradually lose all of its tendencies towards partiality. It will come to clearly see that all arisen phenomena are essentially the same – impermanent, unsatisfying, and uncontrollable; in short, not worth clinging to. As a result, one will become impartial and equanimous, viewing all experiences simply as they are without any judgement or dissatisfaction with any of them. This equanimity is called "upekkha", and it is the seventh and final factor of enlightenment.

Once these seven factors have been developed to their utmost, the mind will gradually shift away from its attachment to objects of experience in favour of their cessation. With the repeated observation of the impermanence, suffering, and uncontrollability inherent in the objects of experience, one will eventually give rise to an unshakeable realization that all arisen phenomena must be thus – that there is no use whatsoever in seeking out an experience that is otherwise, since such a thing can never arise.

With the cessation of seeking, the mind will retreat from the world of arisen phenomena, entering into a state of non-arising, called nibbāna. Though such an experience may last for only a few moments, it will have a profound and irrevocable effect on the meditator's psyche. They will find themselves never again able to cling to wrong views in regards to reality, the practice, or their own experiences.

A person who has realized nibbāna is akin to a common villager who has been brought up with all sorts of superstitions and beliefs and then goes off to the city to study the natural sciences. When they return, they will find themselves unable to accept their old superstitions in favour of the undeniable facts they have come to learn in their studies. A person who has seen the cessation of all things can never be convinced that there is something arisen that will never cease.

This realization is the culmination of Buddhist meditative practice. It is the aim of all of our efforts – the goal of our lives as Buddhists. Seeing this truth is the real duty of all beings; the one thing that will bring us to see the error of our ways, freeing us from all suffering and stress for eternity.

A person who has seen nibbāna for the first time has begun a final journey towards the end of suffering. Though they may still cling and reject out of habit, they are possessed of a constant, unwavering knowledge of the mistaken nature of their clinging. They cannot escape the truth that they have come to see, and so they will eventually, be it in a short or long time, come to the complete cessation of all craving, clinging and suffering.

This is the final aspect of a comprehensive Buddhist practice. As should be clear, each aspect of the practice complements the others, and it is only when they are taken up as a whole that one can be assured of attaining the goal for oneself in no long time.

Conclusion

This is what is taught in the Sabbāsava Sutta, the second sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya. This sutta is recommended reading for all Buddhists. I recommend that you take the time to read it for yourself, in order to better understand the essence of what I have tried to explain herein. It is my sincere wish that this teaching is useful for all of you, and that you are able to put what you have learned into practice, and as a result are able to progress in the Buddha's teaching, that you all may realize for yourself true peace, happiness, and freedom from suffering.

Mindfulness Explained

Mindfulness is an integral part of Buddhist meditation practice and mental development. The Buddha taught mindfulness more often than any other type of meditation practice, and spoke of of it with the highest praise. In the Buddha's teaching, the practice of "sati" or "mindfulness" is called the most direct path to the purification of beings; to overcoming of sorrow, lamentation and despair; to becoming free from mental and physical suffering; to attaining the right path; and to realizing nirvana.

The question might arise, then, as to why the Buddha taught other types of meditation practice at all if mindfulness is really the best way. The answer is that the Buddha was able to see with perfect insight as to what every student needed to become enlightened, something ordinary meditation teachers are not able to do. As great as a Buddhist meditation teacher might be, they will never be able to perfectly assess the maturity of a meditator's faculties in the way that the Buddha was able to do. There is a story in the commentaries that tells how even the Buddha's chief disciple, Sariputta, once misjudged the attainment of an arahant disciple and continued to exhort him even after he had achieved the goal of the practice. It's very difficult to know how far a meditator has progressed in their practice and what particular problems they will have to face; not just their present life has to be taken into account – one has to take into account all of the complexities that make up the individual over all of their wanderings in the ocean of samsara.

For example, in the Buddha's time there was a monk named Culapanthaka, whose elder brother, an arahant, tried to teach him a basic meditation on the qualities of the Buddha, thinking it would be useful to calm his mind. Culapanthaka, however, was unable to memorize the mantra he was given, since in a past life he had once made fun of a monk who was unable to memorize the Buddha's teaching. The result of his mean behaviour was that he was unable to memorize even the brief teaching given by his brother. As a result, his

brother recommended him to disrobe and so he went to see the Buddha. The Buddha immediately understood the problem, as well as the solution. Looking back into the past, he saw that Culapanthaka had once been a king who had a profound experience of impermanence when wiping sweat off of his face with a clean cloth and seeing how it became soiled. In order to take advantage of this distant realization, he gave Culapanthaka a clean cloth and told him to go stand in the sun and rub it with his hand. That very morning, Culapanthaka became an Arahant.

Teaching meditation effectively is not a simple matter. A meditator's state of mind can change many times through the course of their practice, as prevalent character traits make way for latent ones, which are in turn replaced by others. Meditation practice can be likened to peeling an onion; when you peel off one layer, you see there is an entirely new layer underneath. It is quite difficult to predict what will be of most benefit to a meditator at any given time. It is for this reason that even the Buddha placed greatest emphasis on the practice of mindfulness as a universally applicable meditation technique.

In Buddhism we hear often about the existence of different character types and how different meditation practices are suitable for different character types. For example, if a person is of a lustful temperament they should focus on the impurities of the body as a way to counteract their lust. By focusing on the parts of the body and seeing their true nature, a person who is very much addicted to sensuality will benefit by coming to see that the body is actually not attractive at all. If a person is of an angry or hateful temperament then they should practice loving-kindness for the same reason that it will counteract their negative emotions. A person of hating temperament should not, however, focus on the impurities of the body, since it will likely lead to further negativity; nor should a person of entirely lustful temperament focus on loving-kindness, at least towards objects of their desire, since it will easily give rise to further sexual attraction. There are many examples of this sort of suitability among character types in Buddhist meditation theory. In regards to mindfulness, however, there isn't such a characterization – as the Buddha said,

“satiñca khvāhaṃ, bhikkhave, sabbatthikaṃ vadāmi” – “mindfulness is always useful.” Not understanding this distinction can be a problem for people with a knowledge of the classification of character types discussed in Buddhist texts; they may say that mindfulness meditation just isn’t suitable for their character type. According to the Buddhist texts, however, the practice of mindfulness is outside of such a classification, since it deals with ultimate realities; it is not meant to adjust one’s particular addictions or aversions, nor is it a creation-based meditation where one focuses on a concept or entity. In mindfulness meditation, one focuses on what is truly real.

Even from a superficial study of the Buddha’s teaching, it’s clear that this is the sort of practice the Buddha had in mind even when not referring to meditation practice directly. What he taught most often by far was one form or another of the objects of mindfulness – what we call the four foundations or establishments of mindfulness. In some teachings he referred to them as the five aggregates; in others, the six senses; sometimes he referring to them simply as “body and mind”. In all such cases, the emphasis is clearly on being mindful of what is verifiable real in terms of phenomenological experience. The more one studies the Buddha’s teaching and commentarial texts, the more one comes to see that mindfulness of reality is by far the most commonly taught and widely applied form of meditation found in early Buddhism. For this reason, mindfulness is the most reliable method of practice a meditation teacher can prescribe in order to lead the majority of their students to the core of the Buddha’s teaching; whereas one need be careful prescribing other more subjective meditation practices and aware of the potential harm that can come from prescribing the wrong method for certain meditators, prescribing objective mindfulness of experiential reality presents no such danger. It has objective benefits for pretty much everyone who undertakes it and, if practised correctly, has the potential to lead all being out of their individual addictions and aversions without exception.

Once we accept the benefits of mindfulness as a meditation practice, we still need to answer the question “what exactly do we mean by mindfulness?” An answer is made difficult by

the fact that “mindfulness” is a fairly poor translation for the quality of mind we are referring to. Most Buddhist teachers who are familiar with the old languages of India will tell you that it’s not really a proper translation. It is a good word – “mindfulness” refers to the sense of being alert and fully aware of the present reality, which is important in a meditation – but it doesn’t quite capture the actual activity of meditation practice. Meditation in Buddhism is considered a form of work. It’s something that you have to do – a practice that you have to undertake. For example, in transcendental meditation you have to develop concentration based on an object. All meditation is a form of mental development. The problem, therefore, with the word “mindfulness” is that it often leads the assumption that if you’re watching reality – just looking at it – then you will automatically come to see it clearly; that simply by being present – when you walk knowing that you walk, when you sit knowing that you sit, in the sense of being conscious of it – that this is enough for it to be considered meditation.

Some Buddhist meditation centres do indeed believe that it’s proper just to know what’s happening and not cultivate any special state of mind. While it seems plausible that some level of mindfulness can be aroused in this way, it is difficult to see how such simple observation differs from that of a non-meditator or even an ordinary animal. Though it may certainly be possible for a meditator to develop wholesome consciousnesses as a result of simply observing reality, it is equally possible that, without guidance or direction, they might equally come to develop unwholesome mind states. In order to be sure of developing in a wholly positive direction, a more active approach seems to be desired.

This distinction bears out in actual practice; by utilizing the mind’s natural ability to direct its attention – in this case purposefully cultivating a more clear and perfect understanding of the present moment, a far deeper understanding of the truth is obtained in a shorter time than if we simply let the mind go undirected. By simply watching, there is not the same focus and clarity of mind as when one actually works to develop it. This often seems counter-intuitive to people who may assume that meditation should be a relaxing or comfortable state in which one is able

to rest, settling into the moment as a way of calming the mind. Though calming the mind is a valid meditation practice, even such calm requires development to achieve. If one doesn't direct the mind towards purely tranquil states, unwholesomeness will quickly overpower the meditator's mind, rendering the meditation practice worse than useless.

In order to gain true and lasting fruit from the practice, a great amount of work is required. We shouldn't undertake meditation with a complacent attitude, thinking that we can just sit, letting our minds float around, and expect to gain real benefit. If you actually put effort into the practice, you will find that your mind is far more clear, your insight more powerful, and your concentration more stable than simply sitting and waiting for results to come. It is similar to working out the body; when you put out effort, pushing the limits of your present capabilities, whether the object be body or mind, it will become more and more powerful in proportion to the amount of effort put out.

Also, as with physical exercise, it is the effort itself, rather than the result, that is important in meditation practice. When one lift weights, one isn't interested in the movement of the weights but rather the work itself. The weights return to their original position; the result is simply increased physical strength. Likewise, in meditation, walking back and forth and sitting still, watching the stomach rise and fall again and again, may cause people to think: "Well, that's stupid! You're not going to get anywhere just pacing back and forth or watching your stomach for hours on end." Yet, as with lifting weights, at the end of the exercise you have indeed gained something – a verifiable increase in strength and fortitude of mind. So what we mean by meditation is the application of the mind to cultivate increased mental qualities such as clarity, stability, strength and insight.

In Buddhist meditation, the quality of mind that is most coveted is wisdom. Wisdom that understands objective reality is the key to becoming free from suffering, as the first noble truth of the Buddha tells us: "taṃ kho panidaṃ dukkhaṃ ariyasaccaṃ pariññeyyaṃ" – "and that noble truth of suffering should indeed be fully understood." For this reason, our practice of "mindfulness" must be based on the

cultivation of objective understanding of suffering, which is summarized as being the five aggregates – which in turn are equivalent to the four foundations of mindfulness. Mindfulness in a meditative sense, therefore, is best understood as "the work that is done to cultivate objectivity in regards to the elements of experiential reality (i.e. the five aggregates or four foundations)."

The word "sati", which we translate as mindfulness, actually has more to do with the word "remembrance" than "observation" or "awareness". When someone can remember their past lives, they call that a kind of "sati". When someone recollects the good qualities of the Buddha, this is also called "sati". When you recall something to mind or are able to remember something, this is what is meant by "sati". In insight meditation, which focuses solely on the present moment, the meaning is to recognize the experiences that arise in the present moment, reminding oneself of them when the mind would otherwise lose its grasp on the essential reality in favour of judgement, identification, and so on. It means remembering the ultimate reality, rather than getting lost in concepts and illusion.

This explanation is important, because it is precisely our failure to recognize experience for what it is that leads to all stress and suffering. When we see something, for example, we naturally either like or dislike it; when we hear, smell, taste, feel, or think, we likewise tend to become partial either for or against it. We're always judging; even while reading this, you may find judgement going through your own mind; maybe you like what you read, maybe you disagree with it, maybe you find it boring and meaningless. One can assume that you are reading this book because you think it might be useful to you, but still there may be moments where suddenly your mind becomes bored, loses interest, and begins to think about something totally unrelated that is of more interest; maybe it begins to think of work you should be doing, or entertainment you could be enjoying, or so on. This is not something you can blame yourself for, it's the nature of the untrained mind. The mind judges naturally – liking, disliking, reacting continuously. This is how karma is created, how our lives are formed, and how we become attached and addicted to things. This is how we come to

suffer as we all do.

It's interesting to read how some experts in Quantum Physics have come to the same conclusion in this regard, that the mind has a moment of interaction with every experience that can have real consequences in the physical realm. They say that quantum physics leaves a perfect space for the experiential mind to interpret the data and make decisions based on it. They say that with every experience there is a moment where the mind can intervene and collapse the quantum state from a smeared-out series of possibilities to a specific state, a decision. This is very close to the description of karma in Buddhism, and it's very close to what is experienced in Buddhist meditation. It is quite impressive to see that what we realize in meditation is being explained in terms of modern Physics, where they can describe how it appears from the outside and we can verify it from within.

According to Buddhist theory, this intervention of the mind occurs at every moment; every time we experience an object, there is a mental interaction with the otherwise closed physical reality. Normally, the physical realm works according to internal laws of cause and effect; X causes Y causes Z and so on. When the mind intervenes, however, it's able to change this, or to play a part in it at least. Though there is much debate amongst Physicists about whether this is so, it is quite clear from the point of view of a Buddhist meditator that we give rise to judgements and make decisions on a moment to moment basis. In the practice of mindfulness, we attempt to purify our mental state at the moment at which the intervention would occur, remembering it simply for what it is. When we see something, we attempt to see it clearly; we attempt to purify our awareness in that moment, so there is no greed, no anger and no delusion, just pure awareness of the object as it is.

We always hear in Buddhism about how one should stay in the present moment, not thinking about the future, not thinking about the past. This is not just a clever aphorism, it's actually a meditation instruction; you should be meditating right now on what you experience in the present moment. It doesn't do any good to think in terms of how

many minutes, hours, days, or even years you practice meditation; in order to understand reality, you have to meditate just now. If you clearly see an experience as it is for a single moment, then that moment is meditation, and has no bearing on the next moment. Progress in meditation is dependent on stringing together moment after moment of clear awareness until the habits we have formed based on ignorance are replaced by new habits leading to clarity and insight.

At every moment of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling or thinking, we react according to our habitual programming; if we have conceived a liking for something in the past, our reaction will generally be to desire it; if we have conceived a disliking for something, we are more than likely reject it. This patterned behaviour occurs incessantly, so in order to combat addiction and aversion our meditation must be likewise incessant; it must be a moment to moment activity. This is the basis of the practice of mindfulness. As the stomach rises, we focus on it for that moment, then let it go when it is gone; as the stomach falls, we likewise recognize it for what it is and then forget about it. Our only work should be to affirm the nature of the object in the mind moment after moment, so that it reacts not out of ignorance but out of clear and pure awareness of the object as it is: seeing is seeing, hearing is hearing, smelling is smelling, tasting is tasting, feeling is feeling, thinking is thinking. This is what is meant by the practice of “sati” or “mindfulness – to remind ourselves of the object for what it is, so that there is no room for judgement or partiality of any kind.

The way we do this is by identifying the experience with a word, and using the word in much the same way as other meditation traditions use a mantra – reciting it to focus the mind, in this case on ultimate reality. A mantra is a common tool in meditation practice, used by practitioners before the Buddha began to teach; it’s just a word or phrase that is repeated internally to focus the mind. Mantra meditation as practised in other traditions, however, generally has nothing to do with the reality of mundane experience – one does not hear of spiritual practitioners in other traditions using mantras like “walking” or “pain”, since these are not generally considered valid objects of spiritual development

outside of the Buddha's teaching. Instead, it is common to hear of mantras like "God", "Jesus", or "Om" – even in Buddhist circles, it is common to hear people reciting the Buddha's name as a mantra to calm the mind. Mantras of this latter sort tend to have great spiritual meaning for those who employ them and are meant to bring about special, super-mundane experiences for the practitioners. The idea of watching one's stomach and saying "rising, falling, rising, falling" seems, therefore, rather mundane and uninspiring to most people. The truth, however, is that the results that come from focusing on the mundane are far more profound than focusing on an external object, since the latter can only bring calm and concentration, while the former can bring true and lasting wisdom and understanding about reality. By focusing on our own mundane experience, the reality of the body and the mind, we come to understand the whole of the universe, because we are observing the building blocks of reality – physical and mental experience – as opposed to that which is conceptual, like God, the soul, or the Buddha.

The Buddha himself affirmed the truth that the understanding of the whole universe is to be found within ourselves, when he said,

> *"imasmiṃyeva byāmamatte kaḷevare sasaññimhi samanake lokañca paññapemi lokasamudayañca lokanirodhañca lokanirodhagāminiñca paṭipadanti"*
>
> "Yet, in this mere fathom-long body, endowed with perceptions, endowed with mind, I declare to exist the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world."
>
> – SN 2.26

He gave this teaching to an ascetic who had used his meditative attainments to try to find the end of the universe through astral travel. The Buddha told him that "gamanena na pattabbo lokassanto kudācanaṃ" – "the end of the world is never to be reached by going". He explained that it is to be found rather by one who stays still and is internally composed (samitāvi), since true reality is based on personal

experience, not impersonal space-time.

It is difficult to talk about reality without getting lost in philosophy or metaphysics unless one has taken the time to actually observe it first-hand. When our minds are focused on concepts and theories about external objects whose existence are only projections in the mind, there can be no end to our search for knowledge and understanding. On the other hand, when we focus on phenomenological experience, we will have little trouble coming to understand the nature of the entire universe in a relatively short time.

Anyone who takes the effort to observe their experience can verify the reality of the rise and fall of the stomach; that pain and pleasure are truly real; that thoughts, emotions, judgements and decision making truly do arise and cease in the mind. These observations are truly and objectively real – the problem is not that they are difficult observations to make; the problem is that we tend to miss the importance of mundane reality in our quest for spiritual development, preferring what is mystical, magical, exciting and enchanting. We think we know our own bodies and minds too well already, and tend to look at spiritual practice as an escape from the problems of mundane experience, rather than a solution to them. Just like people with low self-esteem who deck themselves out in fine clothes and makeup, pretending to be something that they're not, spiritual seekers of this sort merely cover up what they don't like, rather than making any real or lasting change from within.

This sort of spiritual superficiality is easy to understand, since mundane experience is disappointing on most counts – the objects of mundane experience are ephemeral and uncertain, unsatisfying and unpleasant, uncontrollable and often even unmanageable; the experience itself is fraught with partialities, judgements, identifications, fears, worries, stresses and other mental unpleasantness. The reason it is this way, however, is precisely because of our neglect, not the other way around. When one's house is in a mess, avoiding the mess will not make it tidy. Similarly, by avoiding our mundane experiences, running away from our pain and suffering, we only make them worse through neglect. The teaching of the Buddha is not meant to help us

find new and exciting experiences so that we don't have to deal with mundane reality; it is meant to help us focus directly on that which is the cause of all of our problems – our own body and mind. Once we are able to purify and arrange our physical and mental experience, these very mundane experiences will give true and lasting meaning and benefit to our lives because they are real, not conceptual. Rather than needing always to run away from our homes, we will be like the person who has cleaned their house and is able to return to it in peace and happiness, free from the discomfort or stress of an unclean mind.

Our intention is therefore to pay direct attention to the mundane, purifying the entire psycho-physical system of who we are. That's really what we are, a system; we have a physical component, working in terms of mechanical cause and effect, but we also have a mental component that is able to adjust and to alter the system. The practice of meditation is meant to adjust and alter our system of existence in such a way that it becomes harmonious and pure, free from defilement, free from evil, free from suffering. It is meant to allow us to function harmoniously as a system ourselves and within the system of the universe around us. Every time you remind yourself of the nature of an experience – whether it be an experience in the body, focusing on the movement of some part of the body, or an experience in the mind, be it a thought, an emotion or a decision – you are creating this harmony, purifying your habits and intentions and becoming free from the cause that bring suffering to yourself and those around you.

In order to accomplish this task, we have meditators begin by focusing on the stomach because it is the one movement that continues even when we're otherwise still. If you put your hand on your stomach you'll feel the rising and the falling motion almost all of the time. When it rises you should simply see it for what it is: "rising". Just remind yourself in this way, stopping the mind that wants to judge, to like and dislike, get bored and upset, disappointed, and so on. When it falls, remind yourself: "falling". Don't say it out loud; just create the idea in your mind that "this is this", as opposed to judging or analyzing it.

“Rising” and “falling” are concise explanations of what’s occurring at each moment. It doesn’t really matter what word you use, as long as it is an as-concise-as-possible understanding of what’s happening. When you feel pain in the body, you just focus on the pain and remind yourself that it’s pain. Normally pain is an object of aversion that we’d rather not focus on and would much rather escape from. When we say to ourselves again and again, “pain, pain, pain,” we change that. We change from reacting, our reactionary behaviour, to simply interacting – accepting, understanding, and being able to live with the reality in front of us. When we think of something, we remind ourselves, “thinking”, just knowing that we’re thinking.

It might seem a pointless exercise on the surface, but think about how often our thoughts destroy us; thoughts about what we’ve done in the past, bad things we’ve done or bad things others have done to us, worries about the future, fear of what may come, and so on. We are quite capable of destroying ourselves with our minds, creating great amounts of suffering for ourselves and others due simply to thoughts of past and future. When you say to yourself “thinking, thinking”, you see that it is just a thought, and that it disappears in an instant with no remainder. It doesn’t really hang over you like a curse or doom that you must carry around forever. It’s just a thought.

The Buddha’s teaching is sandiṭṭhiko – you see it for yourself, and can verify the truth of reality for yourself. One of the great reasons for wanting to teach mindfulness meditation to other people is because it is so simple and easy to practice, perfectly free from dogma or belief of any sort. When you see people suffering from things that could be completely cured with a simple explanation of how to be mindful, it feels too good to keep to yourself. The truth is that most of the problems in the world could be solved with just a few minutes of explanation on how to listen to and learn from oneself, if only people would care to try.

These days, many people contact me with what seem to be life-threatening problems of anxiety, depression, addiction, and so on. Often just one e-mail explaining these basic concepts in a way that relates to the problem they are

facing, and the problems just end then and there. In some cases they have been taking drugs or prescription medication, seeing a therapist, etc.; in some cases they say they are ready to give up and take their own lives. Yet, with just a few well-directed words, they are given a new way of looking at the problem – seeing it not as a problem at all, but just as a series of momentary experiences that arise and cease without remainder. Through the practice of mindfulness, one can see the way out of suffering oneself and have no more doubt about the problem or the cause of suffering.

There's no question that even those suffering from severe mental illness can overcome such conditions with meditation if they stick with it and receive encouragement and instruction from a teacher on how to perform this simple work of mindfulness. Certainly, there are cases that may not be curable in in this life; true chemical imbalances in the brain, schizophrenia, psychopathy, etc., may be beyond one's ability to cure in this life simply through the power of the mind, but at the very least one can begin in time to leave this brain behind in favour of something more conducive to mental development in the next life.

Buddhism doesn't postulate an end to experience at the moment of death. Since reality, according to Buddhism, is based on empirical experience rather than external postulation, it denies the belief in death at all, except in two senses: on a momentary level where we are born and die every moment, in an eternal flux of psycho-physical experience, and as a final extinguishing of suffering for one who is free from craving. Thus, we have an eternity to find answers to our problems, and no belief in heaven, hell, or extinction at death can excuse us from working to better ourselves as Buddhist meditators. Further, even in this life it can be observed that the brain is not a static entity; even the physical organs in the body can change in inexplicable ways and seemingly incurable diseases can be overcome by patience and perseverance in mental development.

Altogether, there are four "satipatthana", which we translate generally as "the four foundations of mindfulness"; this isn't a perfect translation, but that's how they are known. The

meaning is actually closer to “act of establishing recognition”; so there are four ways of establishing clear recognition of reality for what it is. There’s the body – the rising and the falling of the abdomen, for example, or the movements of the body; the feelings – pain, happiness, or calm; the thoughts – thinking about anything, and the dhammas, or the teachings of the Buddha, a miscellaneous category for everything that will arise over the course of one’s practice, starting with mental hindrances to one’s ability to see things clearly – liking, disliking, anger, fear, depression, boredom, laziness, drowsiness, distraction, worry, doubt, confusion, etc. Focusing on these emotional states is of great importance especially for a beginner meditator, since they will obstruct his or her progress, as they will be unable to focus on creating clear recognition due to their influence.

A beginner meditator’s mind is much like a baby; undisciplined, accustomed to getting its way all the time. When the mind is not content, it will naturally desire something to make it happy, and be displeased if it can’t get what it wants. Sitting still for long periods of time can be uncomfortable, even painful, and the beginner’s mind will generally react to this quite strongly. Even when nothing stressful arises in the meditation practice, the mind that is used to indulging in sensual pleasure will be dissatisfied with the observation of mundane experience. It will, out of habit, incline towards thoughts of sensual pleasure, disliking, and egotism, and be therefore unable to see ultimate reality as it is, set upon obtaining the objects of its desire, removing objects of displeasure, and conceiving self, other, better, worse, etc. in all things. This is the habitual nature of the untrained mind, which we tend to believe is hard-wired in the brain as cycles of craving, aversion, and identification.

The practice of meditation is not to reject even these negative, unwholesome mind states out-of-hand, but to first and foremost understand them. They may not truly be hard-wired, but they certainly can be pernicious, and are not to be denied by sheer force of will. Rather than trying to force our minds to reject them out-of-hand, we simply teach our minds to recognize the causal relationship between these states and our level of happiness and peace. If they

are negative, they are objectively so, and it can only be out of ignorance that we cling to them. They more clearly we understand them for what they are, the less we will be inclined towards them, until it becomes impossible for our minds to give rise to them because we understand them to be of no benefit whatsoever.

When we remind ourselves of the reality of our experience and cease judging, we change the habitual cycle of the mind. We transform the mind's programmed reactivity, its tendency to respond to experiences with immediate desire or aversion, into a new sort of interaction based on impartiality and acceptance, just by accepting things: "they are what they are." When we are angry, we say to ourselves: "angry, angry…". When we want something, "wanting, wanting…". When we feel depressed, etc., "depressed, depressed…", "stressed, stressed…", "worried, worried…", "confused, confused…", "doubting, doubting…", and so on.

This moment-to-moment clarifying of each individual experience has a corresponding moment-to-moment effect on the addiction cycles that occur in the brain, and thus a verifiable and profound impact on one's life. This is the work that we undertake as Buddhist meditators; it is a very simple, rational and non-dogmatic method to create true and lasting understanding and clarity of mind; it is the work that all beings must undertake to become free from suffering. It the practice, in regards to which, we use the word "mindfulness".

According to the Abhidhamma:

What is sati? Whatever remembrance follows after – re-remembrance, an act of remembrance, memorization, non-shifting, non-floating, non-forgetting, the faculty of remembrance, the power of remembrance, right remembrance – this is called satindrīya (the faculty of sati).

It is called "sati" because of the meaning of "remembrance" – this word gives the intrinsic nature of sati.

It is called "remembrance following after" because of the meaning to remember often or remember in the present. The condition of remembering is called the act of

remembrance.

It is called memorization because of the meaning of being an ability to memorize those things one has seen or heard.

It is called “non-shifting, non-floating” because of the meaning of being fully set, plunged into its object.

It is called “non-forgetting” because of the meaning of not mistaking or forgetting about the things one has done, or the speech one has said, even though it may be long ago.

It is called a “faculty” because of the meaning that it is dominant in regards to the characteristic of appearance.

It is called “the power of remembrance” because of the meaning of not floundering in regards to its object and because it is not negligent.

It is called “right mindfulness” because of the meaning of being able to lead one out of suffering.

One should see sati as being like the supporting pillar of a dam, because it is firmly set in its object, and like a door-keeper because it guards the eye-faculty and so on.

The lakkhaṇādicatuka of sati-cetasika:

Characteristic: the ability to remember

Function: not mistaking or forgetting

Fruit: fixing on its object

Proximate Cause: strong recollection or the four foundations of remembrance

yāni sotāni lokasmiṃ sati tesaṃ nivāraṇaṃ

Whatever streams in the world there be, remembrance
’tis that stops them all.

– Sn. 1041

Ten Perceptions

Introduction

The Girimananda Sutta is a sutta delivered to a sick monk, Girimananda, who recovered from his sickness when he heard the ten saññā (perceptions) that the Buddha taught to Ānanda. Ānanda came to the Buddha and said, "Venerable Sir, Girimananda is sick. It would be good if you went to him out of compassion." Rather than going himself, however, the Buddha considered with his eye of wisdom and saw that the appropriate cure would be these ten saññā, and so he taught them to Ānanda and said, "If you teach these to Girimananda, it may be that he gets better."

The ten saññā describe a detailed progression for practice of the Buddha's teaching. They are not exactly in order, but they come together in a fairly detailed explanation of our practice. These ten dhammas have to be experienced for oneself, but learning about them can be helpful for understanding the direction our practice should take. The easy part is remembering them, though; the hard part is understanding them. So once you see how hard it is to remember them, you can appreciate how difficult they must be to understand!

The perceptions are, in order:

1. **aniccasaññā**, the perception if impermanence;
2. **anattasaññā**, the perception of non-self;
3. **asubhasaññā**, perception of ugliness or loathsomeness;
4. **ādīnavasaññā**, perception of the disadvantages or the negative side;
5. **pahānasaññā**, perception of abandoning, giving up, removing;
6. **virāgasaññā**, perception of dispassion;
7. **nirodhasaññā**, perception of cessation;

8. **sabbaloke anabhiratasaññā**, perception of non-delight in the all worlds;
9. **sabbasaṅkhāresu anicchāsaññā**, perception of all formations as undesirable; and
10. **ānāpānasati**, mindfulness of breathing.

So the Buddha said, that reminding Girimananda of this ten things will cure him of his sickness. This is due to the power of the Buddha's teaching manifested as dhammosadha (medicine of the truth). Some people may think, "We're not sick. Why do we need this teaching?" but the power of the teaching is not just in making people well. The reason it makes people healthy to hear these ten perceptions is because of the power of the truth that they teach.

How do we know this? The only other set of dhammas the Buddha used for sick monks is the bojjhaṅga (factors of enlightenment). When Maha Mogallana was sick, when Maha Kassapa was sick, even when the Buddha himself was sick, He used the bojjhanga as a cure. Just hearing about the bojjhanga, the essence of the path to becoming enlightened, was enough to bring about physical health, even in the Buddha himself. So we can think of these ten perceptions as being on par with the teaching of the bojjhanga, and the bojjhanga are certainly not simply for curing sick bhikkhus.

The Buddha pointed out these ten perceptions, because they are most potent in recharging and giving encouragement and harmony to the mind, setting the mind right. So we should certainly pay close attention to these ten perceptions. We should try first to remember them, and it will remind us how to practice, and where our practice should lead us, remembering that this is the framework on which to base our practice.

Many of the perceptions actually sound quite negative, and it's true that in some sense, Buddhism is a fairly negative religion. The Buddha taught four Noble Truths, and they are all about suffering. What's the best we can hope for? Freedom from suffering. Happiness? Not a noble truth. And here we have these perceptions that we are asking people to develop: impermanence and loathsomeness, and so on. It seems to be a very negative teaching, and indeed some

people try to argue that, based on teachings like this, Buddhism is an inherently negative religion.

It is quite dishonest to say such a thing, though; it means such people haven't really made any effort to study the Buddha's teaching. The Buddha said that the mind is pure in and of itself – it's already pure. The nature of the mind, the nature of reality? There is nothing wrong with it. There's nothing that needs to be changed. We can be happy all the time, but for one important thing – suffering. Once we're free from suffering, what should we worry about? What else should we need? If there were no suffering, why would we have to look for happiness? All we would have is happiness and calm. If there were never a state of suffering, then all that would be left is happiness and calm. Sometimes calm, sometimes happiness – never suffering. So, all you have to do is think for a second: what are the implications of not suffering?

This is why these saññas are most important. Negative things are most important, because they help us to let go of our defilements. They help us to let go of our craving, which is the cause of suffering. Once we see that the objects of our attachment are not really worth clinging to, not worth worrying about, not worth trying to control — "may they be like this; may they not be like that" – once we can see the suffering inherent in clinging, that true happiness doesn't exist in anything outside of ourselves, only then can we find true peace and happiness.

aniccasaññā

The first two perceptions, aniccasaññā and anattasaññā, mean to see that the five aggregates and six sense bases are impermanent and non-self. Aniccasaññā is based on the five aggregates and anattasaññā is based on the six senses, but they're actually saying the same thing. The aggregates and the senses are both impermanent and non-self. In the Anattalakkhaṇa sutta, the Buddha talks about the five aggregates as being non-self, but he explains it by saying they are impermanent, and if they're impermanent, can you really say they're self? What we mean by impermanent is not just that they change, but they arise and they cease.

Once you see impermanence, it's not seeing, "Oh, it was like this before, and now it's like this." It's seeing, "It was before, and now it's gone." Seeing that every experience is and then is gone, seeing that there actually is no "me" that's changing. The person who existed when I was young, the person who will exist when I am old, all of these things are just moment-to-moment experience. There actually is no being. Life is much more fluid than we think, fluid in the sense of no static entity. For example, when you look at water, you think it's a single thing – one body of water, but actually it's many, many particles of water flowing together.

anattasaññā

When you see this in regards to your stream of conscious experience, then you see anatta. You see anatta based on impermanence and based on suffering, because if it's suffering, then you can't say it belongs to you. If it causes you suffering, you shouldn't cling to it; if you cling to it, it only causes you more suffering. You can't control it, and you know that you can't control it because it causes you suffering. If you could control it, it wouldn't cause you suffering.

This is the theory, but the perception must arise in our practice. Impermanence, suffering and non-self are right here and right now. They're in my voice. Notice when the voice stops, you're still thinking about it. It's still going through the mind, you can still remember the sound of it, and normally, because of that, we think of it as continuous. My voice is still there; it's just sometimes noisy and sometimes quiet, but you think I'm talking, so when people make noise during the talk, you say, "Shh, the monk is talking now," even though maybe the monk has stopped talking. Or someone interrupts you, and you say, "I'm in the middle of a talk. I'm giving a talk now." We think like this. We think, "I'm talking to you now", when actually there is only the experience of sound arising at the ear. Once I stop, the sound has stopped. Seeing this is our practice. When you see this, this is what leads you to understand non-self.

People have a hard time understanding non-self. What does it mean? Does it mean that I have no soul? Does it mean that

I'm just a robot or just a physical organism? Really non-self is when you say to yourself, for example, "hearing, hearing," and the mind expects the sound to go in this way or go according to its desire, to continue – that you will say, "hearing, hearing," and there will always be something for you to hear. But then the sounds stop, and then you realize that actually it's quite stressful, this experience of sound, since you don't know when it's going to start and when it's going to stop. You see that the experience, the sound at your ear, your experience of hearing, is non-self.

Maybe it's hard to understand if you're not practicing, but I think with even a little practice you can understand. You can see that your experience is not under your control. You can't make me start to talk. You can't make the sound arise, so when you say, "hearing," you feel this stress, this shaking up of the mind, where the mind used to think, "here I am listening, and I can sit here, and I'll just listen, listen, listen," but the listening only occurs because of the hearing.

It sounds so simple and dumb actually, like this can't be the wisdom we're looking for, but when you actually practice, you see how stressful it is for the mind, that the mind really is silly, the mind really is childish and ignorant in a kind of embarrassing way; intellectually we already know it, but the mind is betraying us. We already know that this is the case, but we don't really know it. We expect everything to go according to our desires, according to our wishes, and so we suffer when it's not according to our wishes. When we see this, we come to know that clinging and craving are the causes of suffering.

asubhasaññā

Number three is asubhasaññā. This perception is also very useful for meditators. Knowledge of loathsomeness arises naturally in vipassanā meditation, but some people practice meditation on loathsomeness: They break up the body into parts: hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, and so on – all thirty-two parts of the body. They break it up and look at one part, the hair on their head for example, and they come to realize how this hair is actually like some kind of moss growing on a dung pile. You don't have to imagine how

disgusting it is because, if you don't shower or shampoo your head, your hair becomes oily and smelly. What is the hair? It's like grass that's stuck in the scalp, feeding off of blood and oil. Where is the hair growing? It's growing in the oil and blood and the skin of your head. Then the hair on your body: chest hair, armpit hair and so on, and when we focus on it and think about it, we see it too is actually quite disgusting.

This sort of thing is hard for some people to hear. Those who practice insight meditation will have no problem with it, but for a larger audience, loathsomeness can be difficult to appreciate in the right light. People will want to argue that it can be dangerous to think like this, how people might develop low self-esteem or even hate themselves as a result. It is true that this sort of meditation only works for certain individuals, specifically those who are infatuated with the body. Even then, it can only repress the defilements, since the lust is a part of the addiction process in the mind and the brain, which is not really connected to infatuation with the body. All this meditation can do is remove our attachment to the body, it can't remove our attachment to the pleasant feelings associated with the body. Still, it is an important part of our practice to come to see the body clearly so that we don't use it to create more attachment. Once we see the body clearly as it is, we will cease to use it as a means to find happiness.

The best way to understand loathsomeness, though, is through vipassana meditation, because then it is a natural realization. The point is not to become disgusted about the body, the point is to realize that we don't have to feel self-conscious about ourselves. The body smells; that smell is natural. We don't think, "I've got to get rid of this, because my body should be beautiful, sugar and spice and all things nice, and smell like roses and clover." We stop thinking like that, and we realize that it is just as it is. It's not good or bad. We have none of the self-consciousness about how we look or how we smell. You can become ashamed sometimes as a monk when you remember that you didn't wash your robes for a week and haven't showered in a few days and someone invites you somewhere and you get in the car and you realize that you're not really as fragrant as might be desired, but that's just a reason not to

get in cars; it's not a reason to be ashamed.

Sometimes you do have to fit in, and so you shower and you wash your clothes. But you stop looking at the body as, "Oh, I'm getting old or thin or flabby." People look at things in quite a different way when they haven't practiced. People are always telling me: "You look thinner than before," but the funny thing is that I get this every month or so. Every time I see some people, they say, "you look thinner than before." I think if I was actually getting thinner, I would have died by now. So I always say, "oh yes, I feel very light. That's good. I'm lighter than before." So, asubha means removing the perception of beauty in the body. When you practice vipassanā, just watching the feet, you'll start to see the truth of the body.

The human body should be seen as a bit of a mistake, I think. This is hard to stomach because we're thoroughly entrenched in this mistake, but the human body is not such a wonderful thing. It's more wonderful than, say, a worm's body or even a dog's body, but it's still kind of like someone built a house and didn't do a very good job at it. We could have been built a lot better, no? We could imagine maybe what an angel looks like. We could add wings or an aura, or at least straight teeth and perfect eyesight. We could actually smell like roses and clover; that would be nice.

So when we meditate, we start to realize that the human body is not so beautiful, and that's useful for us to let go of it, because there is nothing intrinsically good about being human. There is no benefit to this body we have taken up as "ours". The only benefit to being born a human is that you can interact with and learn from other humans like the Buddha. If we weren't born human, if we were born as a worm or an ant or a dog, we couldn't have the chance to learn the Buddha's teachings. This is why the Buddha said it's very good to be born a human, but intrinsically there's nothing good about it, so as humans we have to come to realize this and rise above even the human realm.

It's much better to be born as an angel than as a human. You can practice meditation much easier. So many angels became enlightened in the time of the Buddha because they could sit still in meditation for months on end. But being an

angel is still not as good as being born a brahma. In the rupa-brahma realms, it's even easier to become enlightened. Your mind is so pure that you're able to understand the whole universe. And the suddhavāsa brahmas, where the anāgāmis live, are an even better place to be born. An anāgāmi is someone who is free from all anger and all greed for sensuality, and so they are born in the purest existence possible.

So as human beings we have our work cut out for us because obviously we have some very, very coarse defilements that have caused us to be born in this very, very coarse body that we have to feed and clothe and clean and take care of. The Buddha said that the human body is like a sack with nine holes in it, filled with loathsome things. Here we are, carrying this sack around; this porous sack with nine holes, leaking blood and pus and urine and feces and earwax and spit and snot and all the wonderful stuff that oozes out of this sack that we are carrying around. Seeing in this way is quite useful for helping us let go of the body. It makes us wake up and see our mistake, taking this body as beautiful. This nine-holed sack, oozing and leaking. You can count the nine holes; see if you can find them all. They are all there. So that's asubhasaññā.

ādīnavasaññā

Number four is ādīnavasaññā, seeing the disadvantages of clinging. This has very much to do with the last one, actually, because the Buddha talks about the ādīnava of the body, the problem with clinging to the body. The problem isn't simply that the body is not beautiful, there's more to it than that. There is eye disease, ear disease, nose disease, tongue disease, sicknesses of the heart, sicknesses of the kidneys, the liver, the stomach; sickness of the blood, sickness of the skin; so many sicknesses, all of which are a danger for us as long as we cling to the body. The real problem with the body is the many, many kinds of suffering that come because we have a body; not only is it leaking, but it's poisonous as well. It's contaminated as well; afflicted with cancer, diabetes, heart disease; even just a simple cold or flu. Every year we get sick with the flu or a cold, or some

such sickness. As we get older, we run the risk of all kinds of disease; stomach problems, skin problems, teeth problems.

I read a story once about a girl who suddenly went crazy, and they didn't know why. She was a normal girl who suddenly went insane, totally uncontrollable, and they found that she had an impacted wisdom tooth that was hitting a nerve, and the nerve was going to the brain and causing the brain to malfunction. When they removed the wisdom tooth, she got better. This sort of thing can happen to our body.

This doesn't mean we should hate or loathe the body or even disregard it; we should take care of it, just as when we have a wound, we should take care of the wound. An arahant still takes care of their body. They take care of it as they would a festering wound or an injury that never fully heals, something that always has to be dressed and the bandages changed. Sometimes you have to pull something out like a tooth or an organ, like the appendix. Anyone who says, "the body is perfect," just look at the appendix. People can die from appendicitis, let alone the many other incurable sicknesses of the body. This is the ādīnava of the body.

Really, though, the problems with the body are insignificant in comparison to the problems of the mind. We think, "Well, if I'm born an angel, then I'll have a perfect body." Even sometimes as a human, it is possible to have good physical health for many years. As a result, we can become quite negligent, not interested in things like meditation or insight wisdom. We might not be able to see the dangers because we say, "well, maybe one day I will be sick, but how can I take that as a meditation subject?" As long as the mind contains impurity, however, it doesn't matter what state the body is in. Some people are very, very sick, but their mind is pure, like Maha Mogallana or Maha Kassapa. Their minds were so pure, and yet their bodies still got sick; and so likewise, those of us who are still in good health, our minds can become very sick.

Seeing the problems with the body is very useful for helping us give up kāma tanhā (desire for sensuality), but looking at the mind is much more useful for giving up bhāva tanhā (desire for becoming) and vibhāva tanhā (desire for not becoming), wanting things to be like this or like that, wanting

to create, wanting to become. When we see how dangerous the mind can be if we let it chase after its desires, it can actually be quite shocking.

If one has never practiced insight meditation, most people think that the mind is a great thing. We think, “I like this, I like that, I want this, I want that, but I can control it.” Once we meditate, we realize no, you can’t, not even a bit. When lust comes up, when the desire for something comes up, there is no hope of denying it. It is a very dangerous thing. The mind will drag you, kicking and screaming, to the candy store to get what it wants, and if you want to get it out, you have to drag it, kicking and screaming, out of the candy store. You don’t want to go, and it doesn’t want to leave, and you fight. We have to fight with our mind. If we’re not careful, it will overwhelm us for sure, time and again. If you look at bad monks, even monks who at one time had good intentions and wound up on the wrong path, monks who abuse children or drink alcohol, for example, you can see how dangerous the mind can be. Alcoholics, drug addicts, even addicts to sensuality can get into very difficult states because of their own minds. So this is ādīnavasaññā, number four.

pahānasaññā

Number five is pahānasaññā. This is starting on the path. Actually, this is a positive perception, since it says that we can actually give free ourselves from suffering. The Buddha said we should never lose sight of the fact that it’s possible, that the path exists. If it didn’t exist, he wouldn’t have taught it. He said, “If it didn’t exist, I wouldn’t tell you follow the path. If you couldn’t abandon these things, I wouldn’t tell you to abandon them.” He could have said, as everyone else says, “Ah, live with it.” So we see that the Buddha wasn’t pessimistic. He was, if anything, optimistic, because ordinary people say, “Ah, life is suffering, so, live with it! Make the best of it.” That’s really pessimistic, or some might say, “realistic”, because they think there is no hope for something better. Some people might think that the Buddha was not realistic, but certainly he was not pessimistic. He said, “No, don’t settle for this. Don’t settle for such a

horrible state of affairs, don't settle for any suffering at all. There is a way to become totally free from suffering."

For most people, however, ordinary life seems like a wonderful state of affairs, just like pigs in the mud, or dung beatles in a dung pile; they are very content in their filth, but humans who see them will think, "what a horrible way to live!" In the same way, though ordinary people take great delight in lives filled with suffering, those who have practiced meditation come to realize that this state of affairs is truly horrible, because they have begun to actually pay attention to how much needless suffering there is.

The Buddha said there is a way out. We don't have to put up with this. We can be free. We can be happy. We can be totally free from suffering. pahānasaññā means giving up the causes of suffering, seeing clearly the suffering in clinging, seeing the truly undesirable nature of those things we cling to. When you have pain, just looking at it, teaching your mind, this baby of a mind, that it is impermanent, unsatisfying and uncontrollable – that clinging to it can only bring suffering; until the mind says, "Oh, I understand now, let's let it go!" This is pahānasaññā. The practice of vipassanā is pahāna. When you see the impermanence, suffering, and non-self in all things, the mind abandons the desire for them. The pinnacle of vipassanā is this abandoning.

virāgasaññā & nirodhasaññā

With abandoning, there is dispassion, the mind released. There is the mind without greed, virāgasaññā. With the dispassion, then there is cessation. So these ones go actually quite quickly. They go together. Giving up brings dispassion, and from dispassion comes freedom, nirodha. This is the standard description of the process of enlightenment:

> *nibbindaṃ virajjati; virāgā vimuccati. vimuttasmiṃ vimuttamiti ñāṇaṃ hoti.*
>
> With weariness, one becomes dispassionate. With dispassion, one is freed. In one who is free, there is the

knowledge, “I am freed!”

– MN 74

This is nirodhasaññā, the knowledge of the cessation of suffering that comes when you let go, when you don’t have the craving; when you don’t cling, because you’ve let go. So this is seven.

sabbaloke anabhiratasaññā

Number eight is sabbaloke anabhiratasaññā, seeing that birth in the sensual realms, as a human, even as an angel, birth as a brahma in the material brahma realms, like a ball of light or a god with form, or birth in the immaterial brahma realms of infinite space, infinite consciousness or nothingness, or total quietude of mind, not even seeming to have perception, seeing that all of these are undesirable; not wanting to be born as a human again, not wanting to be born in heaven, seeing that rebirth itself has no benefit. This one, I think, is quite difficult. A person really must be an arahant to experience this perception, so at this stage in the practice, it is more than we can hope for. We don’t have to worry so much, but we understand it, and at the very least, we give up the world that we’re in, for example the world of being born as a non-Buddhist, being born as a wicked child, with temper tantrums when we were young, mean to our parents who tried their best to love and look after us, who was nasty to our teachers and who got in all sorts of trouble. We try our best to not make the mistakes that we made before. We become disenchanted with where we have come from. At the very least, we can give up our desire for such worldly evil.

Even a sotāpanna can come back and be born as a human; though it seems more likely that a sotāpanna would be born in heaven given their purity of mind. Either way, they haven’t given up their desire to be reborn. What they have given up, however, is the defilements of mind that could lead them to be reborn in a world of suffering – the animal, ghost or hell worlds. We should all try our best to see clearly enough to at least recognize the fact that life in any of these

realms would be intense suffering, and that they should be avoided at all costs. Some people think that rebirth as an animal would be quite pleasant; a meditator who has seen clearly the truth of things will not harbor such ideas; they will rather be horrified at the thought of being born in such a state of intense ignorance, helplessness, and suffering.

Even rebirth in heaven, however, should not be desired by one who truly wishes to be free from suffering. There is a story of a monk who practiced walking meditation all night, every night, and, because he hadn't eaten enough food, there arose some sort of nerve damage, and he died while doing walking meditation. His concentration was quite strong, but the body couldn't handle it. This is why we tell meditators not to fast. Even though your mind can take it, the body will collapse without enough food. This happens sometimes, where a meditator decides to fast and then reaches a point where they can't continue in the practice. Even though their mind is okay, the body can't handle it. So this is why we eat at least a little bit every day.

For the monk in this story, however, it was too late. He died and was born in heaven. He wasn't enlightened, but the commentary says that if you die in meditation, you will certainly be reborn in heaven based on that good karma. Now of course this can't mean that simply by walking back and forth or sitting still one will be born in heaven. A person may have nasty thoughts during meditation and be born in a bad place as a result of them, but for one who is honestly trying to develop their mind, even if they don't give rise to insight or tranquility, at least the merit of their good intention in line with truth, purity, and wisdom, will lead them to heaven as the commentary says. So, he was born an angel prince in heaven, with a great host of attendant female angels, who recognized him as their prince and said, "Oh, here's our new lord and master." They assumed he would be keen to partake in the pleasures of heaven, so they enjoined him to "come, dance and sing!" and so on. The new angel, however, didn't realize that he had died, and so he thought he was still a monk and that these women had come to the monastery. As a result, he didn't even look at them, inclining his head downward and trying to focus on his meditation practice, afraid he might become attracted by

their beauty. This is likely the reason he was born as a prince in heaven surrounded by nymphs in the first place; he must have been very much attracted to such a state.

Eventually, the nymphs brought him to understand that he was no longer a monk and argued that therefore he shouldn't act like a monk; he was reborn as an angel and so he should act like an angel. They brought out a large mirror so he could see himself decked out as an angel prince. Because of his dedication to the practice, he was shocked, and straight away went to find the Buddha. He was horrified at being born in the "grove of delight", calling it the "grove of delusion". He said, "This is where I have been born. I was looking for a gold medal, and all I got was a handful of turnips." So he went to see the Buddha, and the Buddha encouraged him that nothing need be done besides what he had undertaken before his death; by continuing the same practice in heaven, he could still win the gold medal.

So even heaven is not enough; we shouldn't think that being reborn in heaven will necessarily make our practice easier. One shouldn't think that, "I don't have to work hard in this life; as long as I am born in heaven, then I'll be happy and free and able to dedicate myself to the meditation practice." We have to be careful to set our hearts on the goal, not getting sidetracked by any positive experience, either in this world or the next. If we don't gain any special attainment in this life, we must make an ardent wish that in the next life we may continue to practice. Be clear in your mind what is important. Don't get caught up by positive experiences. Don't have this abhirata, this delight in any world, in any existence. Be clear that "if I'm born in heaven, I'm going to be like this monk and continue my meditation, even teach the nymphs how to meditate if necessary."

There are many Buddhists in heaven, and if you find them, you can practice with them, but there are many non-Buddhists in heaven, and if you hook up with them, there's no telling where it will lead you, just like how rich people become negligent in their opulence, not thinking to do any good deeds, and are reborn in realms of suffering as a result. Even angels can be reborn in hell if they are obsessed with pleasure and afraid of loss. So this is

sabbaloke anabhiratasaññā. Even the brahma realms are not worth clinging to, as evinced by the story of the brahma who was eventually reborn as a pig.

sabbasaṅkhāresu anicchāsaññā

Number nine, following up on the last, means seeing that all sankhāras are undesirable. This is the final attainment for arahantship; the giving up of all sankhāras. Sankhāra are actually one type of loka – the loka mentioned above was satta loka, the world of beings. sankhāra loka means the world of formations. Not delighting in the world of beings means not delighting in conceptual reality, but sankhāra loka means ultimate reality. Coming to see that all sankhārā are impermanent, unsatisfying and uncontrollable; losing all desire, as was already explained in regards to pahānasaññā – giving up; seeing that the world is made up of sankhāras, made up of formations, made up of experiences, and being able to see experiences for what they are without any attachment.

ānāpānasati

The last of the ten perceptions is that which is meant to allow us to realize the other nine. Once we understand all of this theory about impermanence and so on, we have to actually practice to realize these perceptions for our selves. So, the Buddha ends the set of perceptions with ānāpānasati, mindfulness of breathing. When we practice mindfulness of breathing, actually, mindfulness of the body and mind, we will understand impermanence, non-self, and all of the other perceptions naturally. We will understand the nature of all sankhāras as undesirable, we will understand the truth of experience, reality, and the world.

The Buddha taught repeatedly that mindfulness of breathing has many benefits. He said, *"santo ceva paṇīto ca asecanako ca sukho ca vihāro uppannuppanne ca pāpake akusale dhamme ṭhānaso antaradhāpeti vūpasameti."* The meaning is that mindfulness of breathing:

1. **santo** – is peaceful

2. **paṇīto** – is subtle
3. **asecanako** – is unadulterated
4. **sukho vihāro** – is a pleasant abiding
5. **uppannuppanne pāpake akusale dhamme ṭhānaso antaradhāpeti vūpasameti** – verifiably overcomes, extinguishes all kinds of arisen evil, unwholesome states.

For this reason, the Buddha gave mindfulness of breathing prominence in his teaching; even in the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness, mindfulness of breathing comes first.

What is the experience of breathing? It is simply the breath coming into the body and leaving it; the expansion of the stomach when the air comes in and the contraction when it goes out; a cold feeling when the air comes in and then a hot feeling as the breath goes out. All of these are a part of ultimate reality, and this is where our practice must begin; by understanding these experiences for what they are, and coming to see them as the basis for reality. The point of the tenth perception is to remind us that Buddhism is a practical teaching. It is not taught for the purpose of intellectualizing, to think or ponder or doubt about; it is to realize the truth for ourselves through the practice.

Conclusion

The perceptions the Buddha taught to Ānanda in the Girimananda Sutta only have meaning in regards to the meditation practice: walking and sitting, being aware of the four satipaṭṭhānā, starting with ānāpānasati, then mindfulness of the postures of the body, vedanā, cittā and dhammā – the hindrances, the senses, etc. This teaching can only be understood by one who undertakes the practice of insight meditation in this way; it should be clear from this sutta that the Buddha's teaching is profound and not subject to intellectual speculation. This is what should be expected, of course; only investigation of reality can allow one to understand the truth.

Experience of Reality

In meditation, we must always be on guard against losing our way. There are so many different experiences that may arise during meditation, it is easy to think of certain experiences as “special” or “advanced”, and give up the practice in favour of pursuing these states. At the same time, a newcomer to the practice will be unable to recognize the right path, since they have not yet followed it to the end. Like a person lost in the forest, they will be unable to find their way without proper guidance.

Experiences are not in and of themselves meditation, but meditation is to be performed on all experience. In insight meditation our intention is to see and understand reality for what it is. We try to understand our experience of the world objectively; to do away with the misconceptions and misunderstandings that are the cause for all suffering. So, it is important to be objective about all experience that occurs during meditation, to see each experience for what it is, as simply a physical or mental state of feeling, emotion, knowledge or experience that comes and goes. We must see for ourselves that there is nothing exceptional about any one experience; only then will we be able to understand reality as it is, let things come and go as they will, and be free from all craving, clinging, and suffering.

Proper meditation practice has to be truly objective. This is the most difficult aspect of meditation to understand. A beginner meditator’s mind inclines naturally towards pleasant, exciting, stimulating experiences and, when these are absent, will tend to feel that their practice is not progressing. Indeed, when one’s practice begins to truly progress, the mind will generally react by rejecting the experience, even rejecting the meditation practice entirely, under the belief that these realizations are harmful to oneself. Those experiences that are actually signs of progress are often misinterpreted in the beginning as being negative in this way.

To overcome this problem, it is important to first understand what we mean by meditation, specifically insight meditation.

The Buddha taught that inside of all of us we have three things that we would be better off without; three defilements that exist in our minds and are the cause for all of our suffering. In English, these are translated as greed, anger, and delusion, as sort of approximate names for them. Greed means any sort of partiality in favour of something, anger is a name for any partiality against something, and delusion is the misunderstanding that leads us to be partial towards or against something.

These three mind states are the problem the Buddha's teaching attempts to address. They are a problem because, as the Buddha pointed out, the nature of reality is that nothing in the world can possibly satisfy us; clinging to anything will only lead to suffering. Aversion towards anything will likewise only result in stress, despair, and suffering. There is nothing in the universe we could strive for or against that would bring us peace, happiness and freedom from suffering once it was obtained. Our beliefs to the contrary are only due to delusion or misunderstanding.

The reason why no object of our experience can bring us true happiness and peace is because there exists another set of three realities that are present in every experience and render all experience incapable of bringing satisfaction. These three realities are impermanence, suffering and non-self. Impermanence means instability, being subject to change; suffering means being unable to satisfy; non-self means being not subject to one's control. These three things are called the three universal characteristics and can be verified through the correct practice of insight meditation.

Our partiality towards certain experiences is invariably due to the belief that they carry the three opposite characteristics: that they are stable, satisfying, and subject to our control. We expect, hope, and strive to make our experience conform to these expectations: stable, satisfying and controllable. The reason why nothing in our experience could ever bring us peace, happiness, and freedom from suffering is that there is nothing in the universe that possesses any of these three characteristics. This is where all of our misunderstanding lies. When we talk about delusion, the misunderstanding that leads to partiality, we

mean the erroneous belief that there is something stable, satisfying, or controllable somewhere in the universe.

Under the influence of this misunderstanding, we conceive of certain experiences as being a source of stability, permanence, and reliability. We conceive of them to be therefore satisfying and pleasant and a cause of true happiness and peace. We conceive of them to be under our control, predictable, obeying our wishes and desires: that when we want them to be so, they will be so; when we want them to be otherwise, that they will be otherwise; when we want them to be, that they will be; when we want them to not be, that they will not be.

It is this misunderstanding that leads to greed and desire. We become partial towards and chase after certain experiences because we conceive them to be a source of permanence, satisfaction, and control. We experience certain states of pleasure or calm and, not seeing them clearly, we think that they are stable, permanent, and thus satisfying. As a result, we work and strive and hope and pray and eventually are dissatisfied when the truth prevails and such experiences change, disappear, or are unobtainable. When our hopes and wishes are denied, there arises the opposite emotion to greed, anger.

When we are confronted with the truth – something we would expect to be a source of wisdom and understanding – if we are not prepared to accept it as truth, it will give rise to aversion, anger, hatred, and many other negative emotions. The nature of reality is everything that arises, changes, falls apart, and disappears; everything that brings pleasure is unsatisfying, a cause for stress and discomfort, suffering and pain; everything that we hold as ours is uncontrollable, not subject to our wishes or the wishes of anyone at all. Seeing this for the first time can lead to such great disappointment as to make us reject what we see and prefer preconceived beliefs in the permanent, satisfying and controllable, even though we have observed such beliefs as going contrary to reality. When we cling to such beliefs, we will be unable to accept reality when it is otherwise, and will become angry and upset even to the point of destroying ourselves in anguish at the inability to gratify our expectations.

Both greed and anger are caused by expectation, which in turn is based on delusion or misunderstanding. This is how the three defilements of mind work. Since delusion is the cause of both types of partiality, if we can only remove the misunderstanding, understanding the truth that all of reality is impermanent, unsatisfying, and uncontrollable, then there will be no problem. It is actually possible to find complete peace, happiness and freedom from suffering; all that need be done is to let go of the misunderstanding that leads one to expect things to be other than what they are.

This is what we're trying to achieve in insight meditation. We're simply trying to see reality for what it is, developing clarity of mind, creating understanding and wisdom that will allow us to anticipate and expect change as a fact of life, so that when change does occur, we will be undisturbed by it. Once we've seen and experienced change and come to realize that it is an inherent part of reality – that everything that arises ceases, everything that comes goes, all experience is constantly changing; that nothing in the universe can truly satisfy us; and that nothing can truly be said to belong to us, or be under our control – then we will finally give up our attachment to everything and find true peace and happiness in letting go. It is this peace born of understanding that we try to attain through the practice of meditation.

The problem is that we bring to the meditation practice all of these expectations and misunderstandings with us. So we will still unconsciously expect to find what is stable and unchanging, pleasant and satisfying, compliant and controllable. When we focus on the experience of breathing, for example, we tend to expect that, with some work and practice, it will become stable, our stomach rising and falling constantly and smoothly at each breath; we expect that therefore it will be pleasant, it will be satisfying and the meditation will bring us pleasure and happiness; and we expect that we'll be able to control it, to make it so whenever we wish. Eventually, we think, all of our pain, stress, and dissatisfaction will leave and we will be able to sit perfectly still and silent all of the time. This is what we tend to expect from the meditation practice.

It is essential, therefore, to understand that it is not the purpose of meditation to render the objects of experience as stable, pleasant, or controllable. Only our conditioned misunderstanding makes us think such a task is possible to accomplish. What we are actually trying to accomplish in meditation is to eradicate the belief that any arisen phenomenon can possibly be made stable, satisfying, or controllable. We are striving for the ability to experience and interact with reality free from any expectation whatsoever. It is only this state of non-clinging that will allow for true peace and happiness that is truly permanent, satisfying and dependable.

Our work, then, is to do away with expectations; to come to see that reality is not as we expect. For example, by just watching the stomach, noting “rising, falling”, we will begin to see the true nature of reality. We will see impermanence – sometimes the breath will be deep, sometimes it will be shallow, sometimes it will be one smooth motion, sometimes it will be broken up in segments; basically, we will see that it changes from one breath to another. We will also see that it is uncomfortable – from time to time there will be physical discomfort as a natural part of the bodily experience, but there will also be incessant mental discomfort due to unfulfilled expectations; in either case, we will begin to see it as something totally unsatisfying. Finally, we will see that it’s not under our control – when the meditator learns to let the breath be as it is, the rising and falling will be seen to proceed without one’s intervention; in the beginning, however, uncontrollability is more often experienced as the feeling of trying to control the breath.

The beginner meditator will at first think that they are able to control the breath, until finally the power of their concentration is overwhelmed and the breath returns to its natural pattern. They may even think that the noting itself is a form of control, and want to give up the meditation practice when they see that it is impossible to attain a state of perfect control over the breath. Actually, this realization is the beginning of insight into the nature of reality. The reason for the suffering is not the meditation itself, but rather the preconceived notions of permanence, satisfaction, and controllability that we attribute incorrectly to all objects

of experience. Once we are able to see that it is not possible to control experience, giving up our mistaken beliefs otherwise, we will no longer be bothered by change, stress or chaos in experience, as we will no longer cling to things that cannot possibly satisfy us. Therefore, a person who sees this truth should actually consider oneself very lucky.

The problem is that when one begins to realize the truth, most meditators will not feel so lucky at all. Most meditators when seeing impermanence, suffering, and non-self, will feel that something is terribly wrong. They will feel that either a) there is something wrong with the meditation practice, or b) there is something wrong with how they are practising. In truth, a person who sees the changing, discomfort, and uncontrollability of experience is a person who sees things as they really are. Only by seeing these three characteristics of all experience can we change our misconceptions about reality. Only by giving up our misconceptions of reality can we free ourselves from our dependence on specific experiences and aversion towards other experiences. This profound state can be attained simply by watching one's own breath. Once we are able to simply observe the stomach as it is, bearing with all of its changes and variations without becoming frustrated or angry or falling into suffering, letting it carry on unimpeded by expectation or control, our minds will become accustomed to such simple observation and we will be able to likewise let go of our attachments to everything in the universe. Simply by watching our own stomach rise and fall, we learn how to deal with all problems in our lives without difficulty, finding peace, happiness and freedom from suffering no matter what suffering arises or what problems we encounter, because we will be free from attachment to anything at all.

The main benefit of understanding the impermanence, suffering, and uncontrollability of all arisen things is that one will then let go of the idea of entities. Instead of seeing people as people, for example, one will experience them as a set of momentary experiences, a set of phenomena that arise. The mindful meditator will hear others' voices and understand them as "hearing" – as momentary sounds, arising and ceasing. When seeing others, one will understand it just as "seeing", and so on. The idea of a

constant, unchangeable entity will fall away and one will be able to take people as they truly are at any given moment. Instead of holding grudges or having expectations of others' behaviour, one will take people moment by moment. However other people may be at any given moment, one will respond appropriately to that moment based on the understanding of reality as it is, rather than as one expects it to be. One will be able to confront all aspects of life in a wise and impartial manner, free from the baggage that ordinary people carry around with them: feelings of vengeance, jealousy, fear, worry, and so on. All problems we have with others will disappear. Eventually, all problems we have with everything will disappear. When you experience something that before would make you afraid or stressed or worried, you'll find that you don't judge it to be so anymore. You will take everything simply for what it is.

The reason we stress and worry about the experiences in our lives is because we conceive them to be more than they are. Once we start to see things just as they are, we give up any attachment to them. We see that they're impermanent, unsatisfying and uncontrollable, and therefore see no reason to cling to them or expect them to bring us true and lasting happiness. Because we don't cling to them, wishing, "oh, may this make me happy!" or worrying, "how can I fix this to make it better?", we will see everything as a series of experiences – seeing, hearing, and so on.

A good example of how this works is in regards to the fear of flying in an airplane. In truth, far fewer deaths are caused by airplanes than by more ordinary forms of transportation like automobiles or motorcycles, and yet very many people are still deathly afraid of the experience of flying in an airplane. Once they are able to become comfortable with moment-to-moment experience, the fear will vanish entirely as though it never existed.

I once had an opportunity to teach meditation to a woman sitting beside me on a flight in Canada. She was very much afraid of flying, and when the airplane took off she clung desperately to her seat as a result of the deeply ingrained fear. During the flight she relaxed somewhat, and I explained to her the method of observing the fear for what it

was as “afraid, afraid”, as well as noting whatever experiences arose apart from the fear in a similar manner. Despite my explanations, she was sceptical, and remained so until the airplane was ready to land. So, I suggested that, rather than believe or disbelieve what I said, she should just try it for herself and see the result. During the landing, she practised as I had instructed and when the plane landed she turned to me and said, “in 35 years, I have never been able to land in an airplane without fear. Now, for the first time in my life, I wasn’t afraid at all!”

So, when we are mindful, something like sitting in an airplane will be exactly what it is, with no baggage attached to it, no extrapolating of the experience into being something that it is not. Another good example of how this works is with arguments; when you are in a position of being yelled at and you say to yourself “hearing, hearing”, becoming aware of it as simply a sound, you won’t process the sound as good or bad. You will simply know what’s being said and remain aware of the conversation, taking it for what it is. As a result, you will process it based on the meaning of the words instead of your reactions to them, and will be able to respond impartially, as though you were a third person giving advice to the participants in the argument. Instead of looking at the argument from your own point of view, full of desires, aversions, expectations, etc., you will see it without any desire to defeat the other person or fight to defend yourself. When “bad” things occur, you will just take them as they are. You won’t have any conception of “bad”, “good”, “me”, “mine”, etc.; you will simply see reality as it is and be at peace in every situation, at all times.

New meditators often have to wrestle with themselves when they are confronted with these truths; they think that what they are seeing is wrong because it goes against everything they have come to believe in without investigation. One of our meditators recently brought up a question that points to this dilemma; they said that after meditating, they would look in the mirror and not recognize themselves, something that surprised them very much. Actually, this is an indicator that this person was actually practising correctly, according to the Buddha’s teaching in the Sāmaññaphala Sutta (DN 2):

“idha bhikkhu cakkhunā rūpaṃ disvā na nimittaggāhī hoti nānubyañjanaggāhī.”

“Here, a bhikkhu, having seen a form with the eye, is neither one who takes hold of the characteristics nor one who takes hold of the details.”

Still, for someone who is used to grasping at characteristics and details – those very things that give rise to likes and dislikes, identification and possessiveness – it can be a disturbing realization that reality admits of no such particulars, that our attachments to these things are based on that which does not even exist.

Truly, what one sees in the mirror is just light. It is only after the light touches the eye that the mind processes the image and discerns, “this is me,” or even, “this is a person.” For a meditator, because of their ability to concentrate on the seeing just as it is, such recognition may not occur at all. Whereas for an ordinary person much extrapolation will occur based on the experience of seeing – first they recognize it, then they like it or dislike it, judging one’s image as beautiful, ugly, good or bad. The ordinary mind moves very quickly and without training will tend to move at random like a person in a dark room, bumping into the various objects that it meets with, and suffering accordingly. Once one practices meditation and focuses the mind on the reality of each experience, seeing becomes simply light touching the eye, a reality that arises and ceases. The idea that there is an external object, a person inside the mirror for example, vanishes. When one looks in a mirror, one projects the idea of a person inside the mirror, even though one is clearly aware that there is no such person inside the glass.

There is thus no reason to feel concern towards this sort of experience. When some meditators return home to their families after meditation courses, their families become quite upset when they see that their children are no longer attached to them, no longer cling to them, and they will become quite upset as a result. As a result, even the meditator, if their practice has not progressed far enough, may be convinced that the meditation has caused suffering

for themselves and others. Actually, it is simply misunderstanding that is at the root of all suffering; if everyone were honest with themselves, they would have to admit that all attachment and clinging even in family life has never brought much happiness or peace at all; on the contrary, the more one clings to others, the more one suffers when they change, as this example shows.

The pleasure that goes along with desire is what leads to expectations of permanence, satisfaction, and controllability. When those expectations are not met, the result will be such unwholesome states as anger, frustration, sadness and despair, etc. It is therefore natural that there should be suffering when a person tries to give up clinging, especially towards other people who are accustomed to a mutual clinging relationship with that person. The successful meditator will not make a conscious decision to stop clinging to others, they will simply realize for themselves that no good comes from attachment to that which is impermanent, unsatisfying and uncontrollable, seeing for themselves that objectively experiencing reality as it is leads to far more peace and happiness for those who are do so. Their change in outlook is a natural outcome of seeing reality as it truly is, and the change in how they relate to the world around them is only the natural outcome.

It is thus important to remember to be open to all experiences that arise in meditation, whether pleasing or displeasing. If something arises in our experience, we must admit them to be a part of reality and adjust our understanding accordingly, rather than trying to alter the experience itself or even reject it outright in order to fit with our preconceived notions of what reality should be. If we are intent upon realizing the truth, we should be willing to open up to even unpleasant situations. This doesn't mean that our meditation will always be unpleasant – meditation can also bring states of great happiness or calm – but when we are objective in our observation, we will see that even these experiences are impermanent, unsatisfying, and, in the end, uncontrollable. Once we note them as "happy, happy", "calm, calm", we will lose any clinging towards them that might lead us to expect them to stay or arise when they do not.

We should never cling to positive experiences, and we should never cling to negative experiences. We should be willing to experience both pleasant and unpleasant experiences as they are, not expecting one or fearing the other. We should train ourselves to see that there is no benefit in clinging to any experience. As the Buddha said, “sabbe dhammā nālaṃ abhinivesāya – All realities are indeed not worth clinging to.” We must understand that no experience can make one happy if one is not already happy; if you’re not already at peace within yourself, there is nothing that you will experience that will bring it to you. It is only the freedom of mind that comes from not seeking out permanence in things that change, comfort in what is unsatisfying, or control in what is uncontrollable, that leads to true benefit for ourselves and others. Once you see all objects of experience as impermanent, unsatisfying, and uncontrollable and accept that this is the nature of reality, then you will find true peace, happiness, and freedom from suffering.

So, when unpleasant experiences come up in your meditation you should not become discouraged or frustrated; you should appreciate such events as learning experiences to help us understand the nature of reality. When pain arises, for example, one should recognize it as simply “pain, pain, pain…”, and not be concerned whether it will stay or go, diminish or become even stronger. When we practice in this way, we will see that the outcome is uncertain; sometimes the pain comes, sometimes it goes; sometimes it gets stronger, sometimes it gets weaker. This is the nature of pain. Through observation of the nature of the pain, we will come to see that it is really nothing in it to be bothered about – it isn’t amenable to our wishes, and there is no reason for us to be concerned by its appearance. When discomfort arises in the stomach, one should recognize it as, “uncomfortable” or “discomfort”, or recognize the mind’s reaction as “disliking”, “angry”, or “upset”. When the experience in meditation is not as you would like – when it gives rise to frustration, worry, fear, etc. – just be aware of the situation as it is.

If one practices continuously in this way, eventually the mind will let go of all arisen phenomena. This is the experience of

true freedom – to see that all things that arise must cease. Once we see this truth, all greed and anger will disappear because there will be no delusion to support them. The mind will be forced to give up its misunderstandings. By seeing the nature of reality over and over again, the mind will gradually let go of all beliefs contrary to the truth of reality. The mind will incline away from clinging and find true freedom within itself, outside of all arisen phenomena. Whereas in the beginning, the mind would seek to find permanence, satisfaction, and control, eventually it will give up this impossible quest and accept that such is not possible, given the nature of experiential reality. One will realize that, truly, clinging only leads to suffering, and cease to look for happiness in external objects that have no ability to bring true happiness.

This is the path that leads us to become free from all suffering. I wish all of you the best of fortune on your path. I hope that you are able to find true insight into the nature of reality and thereby true peace, happiness and freedom from suffering.

Practical Dependent Origination

Introduction

An important quality of the teaching of the Buddha is that it is true to the nature of how things arise and how they cease; it teaches that everything that arises comes from a cause. The teachings of the Buddha are able to describe the actual causes that give rise to our present state of affairs, as well as the effects that come from how we respond and interact with the world around us in this present state.

The Buddha taught for the purpose of cultivating an understanding of cause and effect on a practical level – as to the causes of our present state, what consequences will come from our present actions, and what actions are likely to come from our present state of mind. This is the Buddha's teaching on dependent origination (paticca-sammupada), which says that all of our happiness and suffering – all of the difficulties and upsets, stress and dissatisfaction that we meet with in the world as well as all of the peace, happiness, and well-being – has a cause. The teaching of the paticca-sammupada is able to describe this cause. The teaching of dependent origination is the perfect method for us to understand and overcome the causes of suffering and thereby become free from all of suffering and stress that might come in the future.

The Buddha's teaching on dependent origination is best seen as a practical teaching. Often when people approach the teachings of the Buddha they will consider it from an intellectual point of view, trying to understand it logically, to think of examples by which they can understand and accept the teachings. Often this results in adapting the teaching in order to assimilate it into their own view and understanding of reality. This is not the most proper or beneficial approach to the Buddha's teaching, especially his teaching on cause and effect, because it is something that can be seen and understood in our experience of reality through the practice of meditation.

When we undertake the practice of meditation or even while living our daily lives, we will encounter difficulties and problems – situations that give rise to wanting and desire or aversions and dislikes, that give rise to conceit, attachment, delusion, jealousy, envy and so on. These situations allow us to see the nature of reality in terms of cause and effect, that if this arises, that will follow, and when this doesn't arise – if one is able to give up the behaviour that is causing the problem – then the problem has no chance of arising. The teaching on dependent origination says that reality truly functions according to scientific laws both physically and mentally; that the problems of life do not arise by chance, magic, or supernatural means, but rather according to strict laws of cause and effect that can be used both to create and to remove suffering.

The teaching on dependent origination is not, however, a fatalistic teaching. It doesn't say that everything is strictly governed by a cause; in that sense, it is not making an ultimate claim about an impersonal universal framework outside of individual experience. It is simply stating the precise relationship between the intentions of an individual and their result for that individual. It says that we are in control of our own destiny to the extent of being able to choose our actions in this moment, but not so far as choosing what the outcome of those actions will be. It teaches that every type of mental intention has a corresponding impact on our lives, just as every physical action has a corresponding impact on the physical world.

Once we understand the relationship between actions and their results – between suffering and unwholesome states and between happiness and wholesome states – our minds will naturally incline towards the development of those actions and mind states that lead to happiness, since we do not want to suffer. The problem is not that we want to hurt ourselves; intrinsically all beings are ever seeking for that which is pleasant, that which is peaceful, that which is a cause for happiness. The problem is that we don't understand the nature of cause and effect. We perform certain acts and create certain mind states thinking that they will lead to our benefit, when in fact they are only for our detriment – a cause for more suffering.

Simply because of our lack of understanding, our ignorance and delusion, we create states that are contradictory to our purpose; we want to be happy but we instead cause ourselves suffering, which is certainly a sign of ignorance. This is how the Buddha's teaching on dependent origination begins. The first statement in the teaching is "avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā" – ignorance creates formations. It is due to ignorance that our mind gives rise to all of its intentions of finding happiness in what is unsatisfying. Because of ignorance, it conceives, gives rise to ideas, intentions and views, hoping to achieve some sort of lasting happiness through its machinations.

If we understood that these mental formations were a cause for suffering, we wouldn't give rise to them. If we didn't have our natural ignorance, if we understood that certain activities were unable to bring true happiness – for example cultivating a stable materialistic life, with a nice car, a luxurious house, a good job, and other pleasant entities – then we wouldn't strive towards them and the intention wouldn't arise to seek them out. If we understood reality as it is, we wouldn't in fact cling to anything, since no arisen phenomenon can bring true happiness.

If we understood cause and effect perfectly, we wouldn't even give rise to those ethical acts that create pleasant circumstances, such as having good friends, good food, a good society and so on. We would be content and at peace with ourselves, acting only as was most appropriate at every moment without any desire for the attainment of any state whatsoever. We wouldn't strive for anything in the world, because we would understand that striving to attain or obtain can only build up a concept of me, mine, or I, and a cause only for more suffering and dissatisfaction.

This fundamental aspect of dependent origination is an incredibly powerful teaching, because we would normally think that without intention there could be no happiness; without intention no good could come from our life. The ultimate truth, however, is that reality is what it is, it arises and ceases, comes and goes, and there is no one thing in the world that can truly make you happy and at peace; nothing that you can create that won't be destroyed; nothing that

you can build up that won't fall apart. There's nothing that can truly make you happy or satisfy you. If you can't find happiness and peace as you are – as reality is – then you'll inevitably fall into suffering and disappointment when things change and go against your wishes.

Once we understand reality, we will never have any wishes or any hopes or any desires, because we will be truly happy; we will never want for anything. We will never hope or wish for anything, because we will be content in spite of any suffering or loss we might encounter. This is really the key to the Buddha's teaching – not to create something new that is inevitably going to fall apart and disappear, but to be content no matter what comes, whatever should arise. The key principle in Buddhism is that understanding sets you free. It's not about attaining or creating anything, it's about simply understanding things as they are, as this is what will truly set you free.

This is why insight meditation, wherein one contemplates reality for what it is, is so crucial. By simply observing reality as it is, you change your whole way of looking at it; to the extent that objective observation frees you from the cycle of craving, seeking, obtaining, and losing, it changes your whole way of being. Many people begin to practice meditation thinking that they will attain, create, or experience something special that will not fall apart, disappear, or bring dissatisfaction; as a result they become bored with the meditation when fails to bring such an experience. This is an important point to understand, that the meditation is not for building up, it's for letting go; it's not for taking on, it's for giving up; it's not for expecting, it's for accepting; it's not for striving, it's for being at peace and at harmony with things as they are – simply put, it's for understanding.

So when we practice meditation, for example watching the breath – the stomach when it rises and falls, or watching our feet move when we walk, or watching any part of reality, we try to simply understand the reality of the experience for what it is. Whether we're walking, standing, sitting or lying down, when we have pain and aches in the body, when we are thinking, or when emotions arise – liking, disliking, etc.,

we simply remind ourselves of the experience as it is. When walking, we remind ourselves, “walking”. When sitting, “sitting”. When we feel pain, we remind ourselves, “pain, pain”. When we are thinking, “thinking”. Liking is just “liking”. Disliking, sadness, fear, worry, stress, doubt, confusion, etc. are just “disliking”, “sadness”, “fear”, etc.

When we can simply see reality for what it is in this way, we accomplish the highest goal of the Buddha’s teaching. We don’t have to create anything. We don’t have to change anything. We don’t have to change our body. We don’t have to get rid of aches and pains. We don’t have to get rid of the thoughts in the mind. All we must do is simply remind ourselves: it is what it is – “This is movement in the body”, “this is pain”, “this is thought”, “this is emotion”, creating clear awareness of the phenomenon as it is – this is what frees us from suffering.

Part One: Life-To-Life Overview

That ignorance leads to formations is the core of the Buddha’s teaching on dependent origination. It’s actually a good summary of the entire teaching, because that’s really how it works. Ignorance gives rise to formations, and because we are ignorant about them, thinking that somehow they will satisfy us, we develop a habit of forming opinions, partialities, addictions and aversions, and so the cycle of creation never ends. The rest of the teaching is for the purpose of explaining in detail about how the cycle works so that we can understand how to practice to break free from it.

It is formations that give rise to life itself. Formations give rise to becoming and birth. When we pass away from one life, we create a new life. We cling to our partialities and develop the entire existence we see in front of us, with a brain and a body and a world around. We create this, and countless existences like it, over and over again. How it works is explained in the second teaching: that formations give rise to consciousness. The Buddha explained that our mental formations, our volition and intentions, give rise to conscious awareness in this life. This is the second link in the cycle. So at the moment of conception, there arises a consciousness and from that moment on the law of cause

and effect works incessantly. This is how the cycle continues in brief – that our ignorance leads us to create mental formations like volition, partiality, judgment, addiction, etc., then, because of mental formations, kamma-born consciousness arises which creates a new existence in line with those formations.

These two sections comprise the first part of the teaching, which can be considered a summary of the entire teaching. The rest of the teaching serve to explain the process in greater detail: the second section details the arising of objective experience, the third explains how our defilements (starting with ignorance) lead us to subjectivity, and the fourth section describes the suffering that comes from subjectivity.

Part Two: Objective Experience

In looking at an entire lifetime, we must start with the first moment of conception, where new consciousness arises based on the last life. Throughout our whole life, it is consciousness that is most important. In the Buddha's teaching, the mind is the most important factor in development and deterioration of a being. When we consider the above teaching on how ignorance leads to formations, this should be easy to understand. The ignorant mind is the cause of all of our problems, in this life and every life to come.

How does the process work? The mind – consciousness – gives rise to our experience of reality. We experience the physical and mental reality around us according to our state of mind. So this conscious mind is said to give rise to the mental-physical reality we experience from one moment to the next. For instance, when we practice meditation, we experience the stomach, rising and falling. When we breathe, when the stomach rises, when the stomach falls, there is the physical and the mental aspects of the experience. The rising is physical and the knowing of the rising is mental. When we walk, there's the foot moving, which is physical, and the mind knowing it, which is mental. When we feel pain, there's the physical experience and there's the mind that knows it and doesn't like it and decides

that it is unpleasant. And so on.

The whole of our lives thus revolve around these two realities, the mind and the resulting mental-physical experience of objects by the mind. This process is not really a problem in and of itself; obviously we cannot avoid experience, and there's no suffering that comes from it directly. Practically speaking, suffering doesn't come from the objects of experience; it comes, as stated, from our misunderstanding of the experience.

Once there arises the mental-physical matrix, there will arise the six senses – seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and thinking – which are the base for physical and mental experience. Mundane consciousness always arises either at the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body or the mind. When seeing, the eye and the light touching it are physical and the mind that is aware of the experience is mental; when hearing, the sound and the ear are physical and the knowing of the sound is mental. Each of the six senses serves as a base for mental-physical experience of reality.

Because of the six senses, there arises contact between the mental and the physical, which is the next link in the chain of dependent origination. When the mind seeks out the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, or even thoughts, there is contact between the mind and its object; without the six senses, there is no meeting of the two, so the Buddha explained that the six senses lead to contact. Then, once there is contact, there arises feeling, either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; without the mind coming in contact with the senses, feeling cannot arise, so the Buddha explained that feeling arises based on contact.

These five aspects of reality – consciousness, mental-physical experience, the senses, contact, and feeling – are the neutral aspects of reality. Life would be without suffering if our minds were able to stop at feeling and just experience everything as it is. For this reason, these five are the most important aspects of reality for us to investigate. Once we come to understand them clearly, to see them for what they are, we won't resort to further complication, which is where we fall into trouble.

When we practice meditation our goal is simply: knowing when we feel pain, knowing when we feel happy, knowing when see, knowing when we hear, etc. When we see something we try to know it as seeing, so we say to ourselves “seeing, seeing”. When we hear something we try to know it as hearing, so we say to ourselves “hearing, hearing”. When we feel pain we try to know it as pain, so we say to ourselves “pain, pain”, just reminding ourselves it’s only pain, nothing more, nothing less, without giving rise to any projections or judgements about it. This is in line with how the Buddha taught Bahiya, whom the Buddha said was the quickest of his students to attain arahantship.

Bahiya was a man who had been shipwrecked and lost all of his possessions including his clothes. With nothing to cover his body but a piece of wood, he stood by the side of the road and begged for alms. As time went on, people began to think he must be an arahant because of his apparent disdain for ordinary clothing and made regular offerings to him as a result. Some people brought him clothing as an offering but he refused, realizing that accepting clothing would endanger his reputation as a holy man. Eventually, he began to believe himself to be holy as well, falling prey to the undeserved admiration and gifts.

In the end, however, his past goodness saved him when a brahma god who had been a fellow monk with him in the time of a previous Buddha came to admonish him, telling him directly that he was neither an arahant nor practising to become an arahant and that he should go to find the Buddha to teach him the correct path. Immediately, he gave up his occupation and travelled for an entire night to where the Buddha was staying. When he arrived, however, he was told that the Buddha had gone on alms into the city. Rushing out of the monastery, he found the Buddha still walking on the road to the city, and fell down at his feet asking for a brief instruction that would allow him to become an arahant.

The Buddha, seeing that he was still too excited to appreciate such a teaching, put him off three times, telling him it wasn’t an appropriate time, since he was on alms. Bahiya pleaded with the Buddha that neither his own life nor the life of the Buddha was certain, and that he was in dire

need of a refuge before it was too late. Seeing that Bahiya had lost his excitement during this exchange, the Buddha taught him the brief training that is found in the Bahiya Sutta:

> *'diṭṭhe diṭṭhamattaṃ bhavissati, sute sutamattaṃ bhavissati, mute mutamattaṃ bhavissati, viññāte viññātamattaṃ bhavissatī'ti.*
>
> 'in what is seen, there will be only what is seen; in what is heard, there will be only what is heard, in what is sensed, there will be only what is sensed, in what is thought, there will be only what is thought.'

The Buddha explained that to the extent that Bahiya could train himself in this simple teaching, "tato tvaṃ, bāhiya, na tena" – "to that extent, Bahiya, there will arise no 'you' because of that," which means that there would be no misinterpretation of the experience as "me", "mine", etc. To the extent, the Buddha continued, that there arises no self, "tato tvaṃ, bāhiya, na tattha" – "to that extent, Bahiya, there will arise no 'you' in regards to that object." To that extent, the Buddha concluded, "nevidha na huraṃ na ubhayamantarena. esevanto dukkhassa" – "There will be neither here nor there or anything in between. This indeed is the end of suffering."

This teaching is perhaps the most simple yet infinitely profound teaching of the Buddha that we have; it is quite simple to practice but very difficult to understand without practising it. Without seeing that the objects of reality are simply mind and body arising and ceasing at every moment, it is impossible to understand the meaning of this teaching. Once we can see this basic fact of reality, that there really is no self or soul or underlying physical or mental substratum to reality, only then will we understand what is meant by "neither here nor there nor in between," since only then will we give up all mental formations of judgement, partiality, identification, etc.

Part Three: Subjective Experience

No problem would arise for us if we were able to limit our experience to simply knowing the objects of experience for what they are as taught in the Bahiya Sutta. The problem is that as long as we do not to understand reality, based on our ignorance, we can't help but give rise to some sort of mental formation, identification, etc., and therefore partiality. It is this partiality that the Buddha singled out as the problem that arises from ignorance. If we see something clearly for what it is, it won't be possible for us to like or dislike it.

This is a difficult point to understand, but it is the simple truth that can be seen by anyone who undertakes the practice prescribed by the Buddha to Bahiya as quoted above. Because we are so mired in greed, anger, and delusion, we think of partiality as an appreciation of some intrinsic quality inherent in the objects of experience. Due to our inability to see experience as it is and to see the objects of experience as simply arising and ceasing without any other inherent positive or negative qualities, we give rise to all sorts of theories and views about reality, which inevitably involve partiality, craving, seeking, obtaining, and finally disappointment and dissatisfaction.

When we see something, for example, we normally conceive of it as either good or bad, beautiful or ugly, me, mine, etc., based on deep-set partiality that has developed out of our ignorance. When we hear a sound, we recognize it as either pleasant or unpleasant sound, the voice of a friend or enemy, melodious or grating, and so on. Once this partiality arises, it will lead to intention in regards to the phenomenon, either to cultivate or suppress it.

This is how all of addiction works. For meditators who have suffered from substance addiction, or addiction to any kind of stimulus whatsoever, they will find that the mind goes through all of these stages during the addiction process, cycling through the different aspects of experience, the causes and effects. Sometimes they will be aware of the physical or mental object of desire – the sight, the sound, the sensation, the thought, etc. Sometimes they will be aware of the pleasant or unpleasant feelings associated with wanting,

obtaining, or not obtaining. Sometimes they will be aware of craving or aversion. By breaking experience up into its parts like this and seeing each part for what it is – not me, not mine, not good, not bad – we can break the cycle of addiction at every moment and eventually reprogram the habits of the mind.

When we watch our experience carefully and develop moment to moment clear awareness, this is the cultivation of wisdom. When we see something, the truth is that it's only seeing; it's neither good nor bad. There's no phenomenon that is intrinsically good or bad, after all; it's simply because of our misunderstanding and the expectations it brings – expecting certain sights, sounds, or experiences to bring pleasure or displeasure – that we give rise to craving.

Craving is divided into three types by the Buddha – craving for sensuality, craving for being, and craving for non-being. Craving for sensuality is the desire to see, hear, smell, taste and feel pleasant experiences. Craving for being is the desire for something to arise and craving for non-being is the desire for something to cease. Altogether, they simply mean wanting – wanting to obtain an experience in the case of those recognized as bringing pleasure and wanting to avoid or suppress an experience in the case of those recognized as bringing suffering.

Because of our ignorant conceptions, conceiving experience as more than simply what it is, we will inevitably put value judgements on it. When we see someone, we immediately give rise to some preconceived notion in regards to them – getting angry and upset because we don't like them or attracted and pleased because we do. Because we aren't able to see the person as simply a collection of momentary experiences, we give rise to craving, and this is what gets us into trouble, because this is how addiction works.

If addiction didn't cause trouble, we wouldn't have to look for a way out of it. The truth of reality, though, is that our cravings drag us into a cycle of addiction from which it is very difficult to break free. This is according to the next link in the teaching, that craving leads to clinging. Craving wouldn't be a problem if it didn't lead to addiction, a habitual clinging to the object out of desire or aversion. People who

haven't studied the Buddha's teaching, whether they be Buddhists or non-Buddhists have a very hard time seeing the danger inherent in craving. They generally think that their likes and dislikes are what make them who they are; this is exactly the problem, that we cultivate some conception of self, of "I", of "what I like and dislike", when actually there is no "I", when actually we're creating our personalities as we go along. Out of ignorance, we mistake the addictions cultivated through habitual craving as a self, and so it is ignorance that continues the cycle here as well.

In order to justify our cravings, we say, "I like this, I like that," as though this were adequate justification for the craving. Self-affirmation is the connection between craving and addiction. At the time when we crave something, we think, "yes, that's something I like, this is my preference," and this strengthens and solidifies the craving into a habit. So, there comes to be addiction where we cling to the object, and are unable to let it go. We may become so unable to bear its absence that we will actually cause great suffering for ourselves and others if we don't get it. This is the great danger inherent in simply liking something: that we are not static creatures. We are dynamic, and everything we do and think affects our nature. Craving gives rise to clinging; you can't stop it simply by force of will. You can't simply wish for liking to stay as just liking or craving without giving rise to clinging.

Part Four: Suffering

Clinging gives rise to becoming, which refers to the creative process – creating circumstances wherein we can manifest what we want and avoid what we do not. Becoming means cultivating and building up – often building up a huge ego or identification with reality as "who I am": "my status in life, my stable reality, my home, my car, my family" and so on. Based on the cultivation of clinging, we build up our whole reality. The answer to why beings are so diverse – why some are rich while some are poor, some are healthy while some are sick, etc. – is based very much on the paths we have chosen from life to life. Our families, our careers, our personalities, our religious and political affiliations and views

all stem from the ways we've directed our minds and what we've clung to and identified with. All of who we are now comes under the heading of becoming, and it arises mainly because of our habits and partialities.

Finally, due to becoming there arises all of our suffering, all of our stress, all of our dissatisfaction. Our creating, our conceiving, our seeking after experience, gives rise to birth, old age, sickness and death. It gives rise to this contrived existence as a human, an animal, or some other existence. We create existence for ourselves, and it is this existence that gives rise to pain, sickness, conflict, and suffering – the war, famine, poverty, and so on that exist in the world. All this can be seen to arise due to mistaken understanding of the objects of experience and the subsequent craving, clinging, and creating – the idea that somehow the objects of mundane experience can bring true peace and happiness. This is the essence of the Buddha's teaching, summarized by the four noble truths, that craving leads to suffering. The teaching on dependent origination extrapolates on the four noble truths, pointing out that ignorance is the root cause of craving, and gives the details on the workings of the process as explained above.

Summary

The core of dependent origination is that ignorance leads to mental formations; due to ignorance, objective experience is followed by subjective reaction, addiction, and identification, which in turn bring suffering both in this life and in future lives. This is the essence of the Buddha's enlightenment, and the essence of what he taught over the next forty-five years before passing away into complete freedom from suffering.

The Buddha's realization on the night of his enlightenment was that reality works in terms of cause and effect. It was not a theoretical realization. He saw reality working from moment to moment and it was due to this realization that he became enlightened. He saw that it is truly out of ignorance that we give rise to karmic intention – even the intention to help ourselves or others, to do good things for ourselves or others, to create a life that is supposedly going to make us

happy.

Even giving rise to good intentions is due to ignorance. If we understood reality for what it was, we wouldn't see any need to create anything. We would be content and comfortable and happy and at peace no matter what the nature of our experience. Our experience of reality would simply be the conscious experience of physical and mental phenomena at the six senses; it would stop at contact and feeling. We would feel both pleasure and pain but we wouldn't attach to them as good or bad. Anything that we experienced would simply be what it is. We would see it clearly for what it is, not placing any judgement on it other than as an arisen phenomenon that comes to be and then ceases.

If we understood reality perfectly as it is, we would live our lives in the way that many of us truly think that we live our lives already. Most beings assume they live their lives in a very natural, very normal manner. Some even claim that they experience great peace and happiness in their "normal" lives. Only when one takes up close observation of the moment-to-moment experience, will one see that ordinary life is actually filled with much suffering as a result of craving and clinging, and that ordinary life is not really natural or normal at all.

Ordinary experience of reality is only tangential. Without mindfulness, we tend to experience the objects of experience for a single moment, then race off into forming ideas and concepts, judgments and identifications with the object. When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, or think something, immediately our delusion leads us into craving, which leads clinging, creating, and ultimately conflict and suffering – not getting what we want, getting what we don't want, being dissatisfied and disappointed, experiencing sorrow, lamentation and despair, and so on.

The teaching on dependent origination is an incredibly important teaching for people with a genuine desire to become free from suffering. The understanding of the process of cause and effect and the breaking of the cycle of addiction is really the essence of the meditation practice; we practice meditation in order to cure our minds of suffering, and so it is the hope that those reading this will take the time

to understand and put this teaching into practice. Please don't be satisfied simply by intellectual understanding of the Buddha's teaching; take the time and effort to put it to good use in your own life. I wish for this teaching to be of benefit to all of you and that, through your practice of the Buddha's teaching, you are able to find true peace, happiness, and freedom from suffering.

The Nature of Reality

Reality is a difficult thing to understand - if you haven't ever trained your mind in just being present, it is difficult to tell the difference between reality and illusion.

Go ahead and close you eyes and forget all of your beliefs and ideas, forget science and culture and what your parents taught you. You will come to see after a short while that there are really only a maximum of six different kinds of phenomena - seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and thinking.

This realization is made much easier by fixing the nature of each phenomenon that arises firmly in your mind and affirming its essential reality with a clear thought, as in "seeing", "hearing", and so on. It is clear from this exercise that so many of our ideas about space, time, and reality are just concepts or, at best, extrapolations of reality.

Take time, for instance. In reality, there is only one moment - neither the past nor the future exists outside of this one moment. And this moment is eternal - whether we die, or are born, these are just concepts, like the word "wave" is just a concept used to describe a movement of part of the ocean. No matter how often the waves crash against the shore, it is still the same ocean. Death is only the crash against the shore - really, nothing has died, it is a physical process which is simply the dissolution of a collective structure of matter. In reality, there are still only six phenomena, just as the wave is still only water.

And just as the waves come again and again, so to does the process we call "death" come to beings again and again. At that moment, the constructed reality that has built itself up since the time we were born comes crashing down in a single moment. The mind, however, simply continues its search for happiness, building up a newly constructed reality according to its nature at that moment. The mind then follows after new experiences as they arise, just as it always has. The experiences change, of course, but they are still the same six phenomena. The functioning of the six senses in the present

moment never ceases for one who still seeks after more pleasureable phenomena, since there will always be more and more building up of constructed reality, just as the ocean produces waves, again and again. Death is just the end of one wave, and the beginning of another.

The problem arises when we look at ourselves from without, instead of from within. From without, we see only the body in its fully-formed state; we cannot see the mind, and so we believe it to be only a product of the normal functioning of the body. From within, we can see that the body is merely an extension of the experiences of the mind, as they coalesce to give us the false impression of a self. From without, it is easy to believe that when the body dies, so too does the mind. From within, it makes no sense at all, just as it makes no sense that the crashing of the wave puts an end to the great ocean. Death is an illusion, just as is a wave. For one who understands reality, it is not proper to say that one believes in rebirth; one should better say simply that one does not believe in death.

The attainment of freedom from birth and death is simply the realization that this world is made up entirely of an endless process of arising and ceasing phenomena that is completely without purpose, leading only to more misery for one who clings thereto and thirsts for happiness therein. Such a realization leads to final freedom from the process of birth and death, as no more craving means no more building up and seeking out and new phenomena. At the moment of death for one who no longer clings to birth and life, the waves cease, once and for all. Or, in the case of one who merely craves and clings less, through training of the mind to a limited degree, there still may be waves, but they are quieter, calmer, free from the storm skies and blowing winds of samsara.

Reality is all around us; it is everything we take for granted and for the most part ignore. When we come to see this reality that exists so clearly around us, our minds become clear, calm and cleaned of all imperfections and addictions. When we come to see reality, the truth will indeed set us free.

Simple Truth

Studying the Dhamma is not just for the purpose of acquiring knowledge, but also for the purpose of getting encouragement in putting our knowledge into practice - bridging the gap between what we know and what we need to know. What we know is the knowledge we gain from study of the Buddha's teaching. What we need to know is the truth of the Buddha's teaching from empirical observation. Part of our study, therefore, must be in regards to putting our knowledge to good use, both how and why.

When we study the Dhamma in depth, we will become encouraged by its simplicity and practicality. The Buddha's teaching is called "opanayiko" - "leading one onward", in the sense that the deeper one delves into it, the more one becomes reassured and convinced of its truth. This is an important aspect of our study of the Buddha's teaching, that it brings us both the tools and the conviction to put it into practice.

The connection between study and practice is essential for someone on the path to liberation. Without study, one will wander aimlessly like a person lost in the wilderness without a map. Without practice, one will be like a person who spends all their time studying maps without ever venturing out into the wilderness. Even if one undertakes both study and practice but is unable to connect the two, one will still be unable to make use of either, like a person who is unable to read maps or unskilled in their use. If we wish to find the way out of suffering, we must connect the theoretical truths we learn from the Buddha with our own practical realizations. If we are unable to do so, we will find they may actually work against each other, our practice making us doubt our study and our study making us doubt our practice.

Doubt is a common hindrance on the path of practice. One may doubt about the practice itself, asking what benefit can possibly come from walking and sitting in endless repetition, or of what use it could be to remind oneself constantly of what one already experiences every day. A beginner meditator may doubt whether any benefit has come from

their practice, even after they have already gained much. Unless one has become thoroughly relieved of one's doubts through extensive study and practice, one may doubt about the truth, even upon seeing it for oneself.

A meditator may doubt as well about their ability to succeed in the practice, overwhelmed by the enormity of the task of ridding oneself of all defilements. They may feel unequipped to deal with the obstacles they face in breaking down their mental chaos and, due to habitual laziness and other defence mechanisms, they may even give up the practice simply out of perceived inability.

When we receive teachings on Buddhism or meditation practice, from books, talks, or discussion, it can help us to make sense of our experience and break it down into manageable, surmountable challenges. For example, a very important teaching of the Buddha is in regards to the three characteristics of all worldly experience - impermanence, suffering, and non-self. Most Buddhist meditators are well-familiar with this teaching. Intellectually it is a teaching that is relatively easy to understand, whether we agree with it or not. Yet, regardless of how many times we have heard this teaching, how much study we have done on it, how much thought we have put into it, still, when we practice, we generally expect things to be permanent, satisfying, and controllable, and still manage to become frustrated very easily when our experience is not in line with our expectations.

We have been taught to believe that suffering is something to be avoided at all costs, and so we naturally think something is wrong with our practice when it forces us to face suffering. We very quickly forget the teachings we have learned if we are not reminded of them during our practice, and so it is very important for us to maintain a good relationship with a teacher during our training.

Experience of impermanence, suffering, and non-self is very important on the path to liberation. In fact, it is the very thing we are trying to realize. Once you see that something is impermanent, you won't have any reason to cling to it as a source of stability. You won't worry or fuss about such a thing and you won't depend on it erroneously, suffering when

it changes. You will come to see that your suffering is caused solely by mistaken perception of permanence and stability in what is neither permanent nor stable. Nonetheless, if we are not reminded and encouraged about this truth, we will be hard-pressed to see for ourselves the true nature of our condition. Without proper guidance and encouragement, the truth alone may not be enough to set us free.

Truth, according to the Buddha's teaching, is quite simple. Ordinarily, when we think of truth or wisdom, we tend to make them out to be much more complicated than they actually are. We tend to have the idea that wisdom must be something complicated and difficult to understand, requiring years of study to appreciate. We think that truth requires much explanation, that a theory must have many facets and complexities for it to be the profound spiritual truth we are seeking in our practice.

Because of people's desire for abstruse and complex teachings, it's hard to give a talk on truth according to the Buddha - most Buddhist meditators have already heard about the four noble truths and will not find it of much interest to listen to a teaching on such a simple theme. The truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering - what more is there to say?

We generally think of the truth of suffering, for example, as something that needs lengthy explanation to understand, complete with examples and similes from ordinary life. Really, the truth of suffering is a very simple thing, encompassing all aspects of our experience. The truth of suffering means that none of what we are experiencing right now is happiness - none of it can possibly make us happy. It really does mean just that and it really is just this truth that will, when we come to see it for ourselves, set us free from suffering.

The four noble truths are actually very important to keep in mind and contemplate during our practice. When we encounter suffering in our practice, we can reflect on the four noble truths and reassure ourselves based on our observations that it's only our craving and attachment that

causes us to suffer. That is the second noble truth - that's really all it means, that desire for things to be this way or that way or for obtaining this or that object - is really the single, solitary cause for all suffering.

The wisdom that we're trying to gain is a very simple set of truths; for that reason itself it can be quite difficult to internalize. Our minds aren't ordinarily programmed to accept simplicity; our minds are programmed to make things complicated out of habit. When we hear that all of our experience is unsatisfying, we immediately come up with various objections, theories about how happiness can actually be found in this or that experience. We may think it to be a very pessimistic teaching, due to our long-acquired views and beliefs about how satisfying the objects of our desire must be. As a result, we miss the important fact that it's the truth.

No matter how much we believe, wish, pray, or theorize otherwise, when we investigate for ourselves, observing experience empirically - when we stop speculating and start observing, stop believing and start learning - we cannot deny the simple truth that nothing in this universe can possibly bring us true happiness or peace. When we see reality clearly for what it is, we cannot deny the observable truth that clinging to anything is cause only for greater suffering.

In meditation practice, our inherent inclination towards complexity can become a real problem. We try our best as teachers to bring our students back to simple observation, asking questions that help them really come to understand reality for what it is - simple questions, like: "Are the movement of the right foot and the movement of the left foot one thing or separate things?"

This is a very simple question with a very simple answer, and yet immediately the mind tries to analyze it, turn it into a philosophical or theoretical question. The purpose of the questions we ask meditators is to test whether the meditator is able to relate to reality objectively, or whether they are caught up in projections, judgements and views. The first step in meditation is to attain right view, which means giving up all theoretical views and beliefs. Right view is not really a view at all; it means to just see things simply as they are, to

see the simple reality of our experience for what it is.

When walking, the movement of one foot arises and ceases; then the movement of the other foot arises and ceases in turn. The awareness of each movement likewise arises and ceases, never lasting beyond the object of awareness itself. This is the simple truth, but our minds can't be easily contented with such truth, preferring to create ideas and concepts about "who" is walking, or "who knows" the walking. It is because of our inability to accept the simple truth of experience that we give rise to all kinds of views, philosophies and beliefs about self, soul, existence and reality.

Likewise, when we hear teachings about impermanence, suffering and non-self, we take it as instruction to think about whether this or that is impermanent, about what things cause us suffering, about our inability to control everything. We may even take it as a reason to doubt the Buddha's teaching, since it certainly isn't in accord with our views and beliefs to think everything to be so. In this example as well, the truth we are trying to understand is so simple that we are unable to appreciate it. In meditation, we are simply trying to appreciate what we already see - that everything arises and ceases, that it therefore is unsatisfying, and unfit to be regarded as self or soul, "me" or "mine".

The truth of impermanence is that everything that arises ceases. It's not a thought like "yes, it was here a moment ago, now it's gone, so it must be impermanent!" It's the awareness that arises when you realize that something you took as a stable entity is actually made up of momentary experiences. When you watch an experience from beginning to end, for example walking, noting "stepping right" and "stepping left", or watching the stomach, noting "rising", "falling", you will see without need for speculation that every part of the experience is momentary and insubstantial, without essence or intrinsic worth of any kind. This is what is meant by seeing impermanence, suffering, and non-self; it is the result of the practice of meditation. It is not the practice itself.

The moment to moment realizations that occur in this way

are what we mean by wisdom. Realizing the truth about reality, destroying our delusions about permanence, satisfaction, and controllability in regards to the objects of experience, is what is meant by realization of the four noble truths. Nothing that arises can ever bring us true happiness, since there is nothing arisen that does not immediately cease. As long as we seek happiness in what we see, hear, smell, taste, feel or think, we will be ever unsatisfied, victims of stress and suffering due to our mistaken conceptions.

In the beginning, this knowledge will be weak, and the meditator may doubt what they are experiencing. At this point, it is called the "preliminary" path, because it has not reached maturity. Through repeated cultivation of knowledge, however, the meditator's mind will gradually shift from disbelief to certainty. At the moment where the mind makes a decisive realization that nothing in one's experience can ever bring happiness, the meditator will experience turning away from arisen phenomena, entering into the unarisen, permanent, satisfying freedom from suffering; it is at this moment that one can be said to understand the four noble truths for themselves.

Such an experience occurs from the accumulation of empirical wisdom - simple wisdom, not wisdom from books, not concepts or ideas. People come to practice meditation to find wisdom and become quickly discouraged when they realize that they are not acquiring any "profound realizations"; all they see is the feet moving and the stomach rising and falling. They feel discouraged by the chaotic nature of their experience, seemingly the antithesis of true meditation practice. When the meditation is uncomfortable, they think something is wrong with the meditation; when they can't follow the meditation object, they think something is wrong with themselves. Inevitably, most meditators come to a crisis, wondering why they are wasting their time repeating the same meaningless activities day after day with no result other than seeing how unsatisfying it is.

There is a famous movie in America called "The Karate Kid", where a retired Japanese karate teacher is approached by an American kid who asks him to teach him karate. The old man has the kid paint a fence and wax cars for hours on end,

until finally the kid gets fed up. He says, "look, I'm really grateful for you agreeing to teach me, but when are we going to get into learning karate?" The old man looks at him and replies, "show me how you paint the fence", and as the kid is demonstrating, the old man punches him. Without thinking, the kid is able to react quickly based on the repetitious movements of painting the fence.

Then he says, "now, show me how you wax the car", and then punches the kid again and the kid is able to block the punch. The teacher shows him that these simple exercises have a profound impact on the body and mind; they themselves are the martial art, the training. When I used to practice rock climbing, we were similarly taught that the mind develops habits in coordination with the body; if we learn a great many of coordinated mind-body actions, we will be able to react to any set of conditions, for example being able to climb a cliff wall we have never seen based on the set of "moves" we have trained in.

Meditation practice likewise relies on the mind's ability to acquire and modify habitual patterns of behaviour. Simply repeating to yourself, "rising", "falling" or "stepping right", "stepping left" will cultivate habits of bare recognition free from projection, judgment, identification and belief, changing the very core of your understanding of reality, from one based on ignorance to one based on experience.

The reason meditation is a cause for so much suffering when we start is because it goes against our ingrained habits; we are simply unaccustomed to bare attention, needing novelty, diversity and excitement to keep us "satisfied". As a result, we cultivate habits that are against our best interest - habits of addiction, aversion and self-delusion, and are unable to ever understand the simple truth of how much suffering these habits bring. Only once we cultivate habits of simple recognition and full awareness of what is here and now, can we begin to discard our unwholesome habits, as we do away with the underlying wrong beliefs and views in their possessing any worth or benefit.

I once heard it explained by a scientist as to why we cultivate views and beliefs that are out of line with reality. It's an interesting question, really, how it is possible for

someone to believe in the benefit of something that leads clearly to their own detriment. Surely our intelligence itself plays a part in the problem. There is no other race on Earth so capable of acting to its own detriment as the human race, and yet we are unquestionably the most intelligent, most advanced race on Earth. As far as I know, no other species on Earth is afflicted with the kinds of stress, anxiety, depression, cruelty, despair, or self-hatred that human beings are capable of as a matter of course.

The theory proposed, however, as to why we are prone to develop such errant habits and tendencies is founded on a behavioural pattern we share in common with our less intelligent animal friends. It is understood to be, in purely evolutionary terms, against our best interest to investigate thoroughly every experience we encounter. For example, when one hears a rustling sound while walking in a field of tall grass, the best response is clearly not to take the time to investigate, lest one risk becoming a meal for a hungry predator. Much safer is simply believing there to be a predator and running away; no harm will come if one is mistaken. The unfortunate side effect of this wise-seeming precaution is that it becomes a cornerstone to our outlook on life - that problems are not meant to be understood, but merely "solved" by whatever means possible.

Evolution measures success based on proliferation. The habits and tendencies that allow a species to flourish are those that will be favoured and passed on. Unfortunately, such habits do not always happen to be those in the best interest of the individuals making up the species; behavioural patterns such as sexism, tribalism, colonialism, xenophobia, and, of course, religious views and beliefs tend to proliferate more successfully than their more humane / rational counterparts.

The idea that religious belief may be of evolutionary benefit or detriment is not hard to understand, nor is it undocumented; the Indo-Ariyan people who conquered India in the time before the Buddha, for example, had a well-established religious tradition that well-suited their war-like nature. Their inclination towards conflict was most certainly supportive of their conquest over the relatively

peaceful indigenous peoples of the sub-continent, whose religious beliefs in the sanctity of life and harmony of nature did little to prepare them against such a danger.

Later, once Buddhism had come to dominate much of Indian religious thought with its teachings on non-violence and renunciation, another conquest occurred in India. This time, the conquerors used warrior teachings of Islaam as support for something akin to genocide against "idol-worshipping" Buddhists. Clearly, there is much evolutionary benefit in taking the worst of a religion and twisting it for the purpose of committing such evil and cruelty as to cause suffering and despair for countless individuals in favour of the prolifration of a species.

This aspect of evolution, coupled with our relatively high intelligence, is arguably what leads human beings to unconsciously prefer taking shortcuts in solving problems rather than actually investigating the problem, and thus develop views and beliefs that are very much out of line with reality. Limited observation of "what works" leads us to cultivate habitual behaviour that doesn't actually "work" over the long term - bringing stress, suffering, and despair simply due to favouring immediate results over careful investigation.

Worse, over time this methodology perpetuates itself, as we refine our ability to shorten the time it takes in which to "solve" a problem to an ever greater degree. Such is where we find ourselves in modern times - having fine-tuned our ability to "solve" all of our problems in as short a time possible by taking a pill, flicking a switch, pushing a button, etc. From a purely evolutionary point of view, our shortcut-taking has worked incredibly well; human beings now dominate the Earth so completely as to leave no question of our evolutionary success. From a spiritual point of view, however, our success has had disastrous consequences, making us more and more sensitive and reactionary towards suffering, more demanding of the acquisition of pleasure, and less and less satisfied with what we have. Now, instead of dealing with the problems we already have, we tend to create new and more complex

problems in order to solve the original ones.

There is an old story of an ascetic who once upon a time lived under a tree with nothing but his robes. One day someone invited him to live in a hut that they had built, so that he could avoid the inclemencies of weather, bugs, etc. Thinking this would help his spiritual life, he accepted. After some time living in the hut, however, he began to be troubled by rats who would bite holes in his robes when he left them in the hut. In order to solve the problem, he procured a cat to scare away the rats. This, however, presented a new problem of how to feed the cat. To solve this problem, he procured a milk cow. The problem with the milk cow, of course, was it needed one to tend to and milk it. To solve this problem, he found a milkmaid to stay with him, and in the end found himself falling in love and breaking his asceticism, taking on all of the problems of the household life. This is a very good example of how we try to solve simple problems by creating more complex ones.

In modern times, this problem is seen all the more acutely. Through trying to avoid simple problems like how to procure food and shelter, we find ourselves caught up in social, economical, political, and even global problems that are all far removed from the very simple problems they are designed to solve.

If the goal is the proliferation of a species, approximation and shortcut taking is a tried and tested means of advancement - the species flourishes, adjusting behaviours only when they hinder its proliferation. This is how the animal realm functions, and many humans as well seem satisfied with this sort of "development" as a positive thing. It is thought to be a sign of advancement that the human species has proliferated so rapidly in a relatively short time. Such thinking is actually an example of the problem; rather than taking the time to look at whether we are actually solving anything, we see our ability to continue taking shortcuts as proof that we are, and so are encouraged to spend even less time studying our problems and more time finding ways to take shortcuts around them.

As a result of all of this, our beliefs and views don't necessarily have anything to do with reality; they only serve

to perpetuate themselves; beliefs in things like creator gods are "positive" precisely because they allow you to avoid taking the time to examine issues like creation. Belief in entities like a soul are "positive" because they allow you to avoid having to understand the complex workings of reality. Once you have the "answers", you are free to spend your time on other things like how to further shorten the distance between reality and desire, like a mouse on an ever shrinking wheel.

In the end, most of our advancements as a species can be seen to be nothing more than shortcut-taking in order to avoid the need to understand reality. It's a completely senseless state of being and yet it is one that has come to define our existence as human beings. We seek out pleasure for the purpose of becoming better able to seek out pleasure; we chase away displeasure for the purpose of becoming better able to chase away displeasure. In the end, we haven't the slightest bit of understanding about the nature of either, except that the one is to be desired and the other is to be avoided. Even that "understanding" is based primarily on what allows us to continue our development of habitual shortcut-taking - displeasure slows us down, pleasure speeds us up. There is no rationality to our preference beyond this, nor is there any foreseeable benefit to come from it. We are not just like mice running around in a wheel, we are like mice winding up our own mouse traps until they snap on our necks. Instead of moving closer and closer to satisfaction and peace, we move faster and faster away from them in our quest for pleasure and against displeasure - less and less satisfied with what we have until death puts an end to the cycle for us.

I don't think it is at all a good thing to take shortcuts. Our propensity towards "whatever works" has rendered the system broken in a very fundamental way, as we never truly understand anything of what we experience - preferring rather to put it to use to obtain more of it, and quicker. We are like children who see a rainbow and immediately run to find an imaginary pot of gold at its end; instead of appreciating reality because it is real, we prefer illusion because it is more.

Unfortunately, we tend to bring this sort of attitude to the meditation practice as well. We know that we are here to gain wisdom, to understand reality in a more profound way. That's usually why someone decides Buddhism is for them, because they realize that wisdom is the most important tool in attaining true peace and happiness. Yet, even though we appreciate this intellectually, when we actually practice meditation we still tend to incline towards "fixing" our problems, rather than understanding them.

When pain arises, we tend to expect that by saying "pain, pain" to ourselves the pain should go away. We tend to be reluctant to use the same method on pleasant experiences for the same reason, thinking if it isn't broken, why "fix" it? When we begin to realize that the meditation practice doesn't actually help us to remove unpleasant experiences or cultivate pleasant ones, we are more than ready to reject it, forgetting our intention to cultivate wisdom entirely. We see that, rather than fixing our problems, this method forces us to do the opposite and accept our problems without trying to fix them; something that goes very much against our ingrained inclination towards problem-solving.

Truly, wisdom can only come when we look at our problems objectively. The word for wisdom in Pali is "paññā", which means to know something completely. "pa" means completely, "ñā" means to know. The wisdom we are seeking is simply the complete understanding of the nature of the objects of experience, the very problems that we seek to chase away.

What is the wisdom? Wisdom is when you say to yourself 'stepping right' - at the moment when you know 'this is stepping right,' that's wisdom. Yet we tend to wonder how that can be; we are convinced that this cannot be true wisdom, that the Buddha couldn't have taught something so simple. What did the Buddha teach us to know, though? He taught us to understand the truth of suffering, to see suffering as a truth inherent in all experience. All experience is considered to be dukkha because it can't satisfy us - it's not worth anything, it's useless. So, how do you come to know that something is dukkha? Obviously, you must come to see it for what it is. In order to see it for what it is, you

must look at it quite closely, which is all we are trying to do in meditation practice.

When you observe experience objectively, you will see it clearly for what it is. If, when you observe reality, you come to see that it is truly, intrinsically worth something, then we have to throw the four noble truths out the window. The point is that when you do observe reality, you can't help but see the truth of suffering - that experience is truly unstable, unsatisfying and uncontrollable. This is what we see just by recognizing simple experiences like "stepping right". It's just a name for the movement, isn't it? The reality is the movement, but if you say, "moving, "moving", it becomes monotonous, so we break it up. Eventually we break the step up into two, three, or more parts, as in, "lifting", "placing" or "lifting", "moving", "placing"; they are just words that reify the experience, instead of proliferating it, as in 'this is good', 'this is bad', 'this is me', 'this is mine', 'this is right', 'this is wrong'. We say, instead, 'this is this'.

Once you see that it is what it is, then you see what it is. You say, "lifting", and you know this as "lifting". You don't see it as permanent, satisfying, or under your control. You see it as lifting, then it's gone. You do the same with feelings, the mind, the emotions and so on. This is the accumulation of wisdom. It's very simple, so we call it 'simple wisdom'.

The pursuit of wisdom is not some complex intellectual endeavour. We're just trying to know things fully, to understand things completely. This means that everything in our practice and in our lives is a fit and proper object of meditation practice - we must, in fact, take the whole of our experience as a meditation object. The real problem arises when we compartmentalize reality, so our meditation becomes only one part of our life, and during the rest of our life we don't think of the meditation at all; we may even compartmentalize the meditation practice itself, meditating on some objects of experience and avoiding or indulging in others.

When we have pain we immediately try to adjust our position. When we have bad thoughts, we immediately try to push them away, thinking, "no, no stop, I'm trying to

meditate". That's a big mistake; never come to me and tell me that something is getting in the way of your meditation. It's too easy; don't walk into that one.

Someone recently complained on our Internet forum, "I try to meditate but there is all this sound, and it's getting in the way of my meditation." Well, you know what the answer is going to be, if you've been paying attention - that the sound should be your meditation. At the moment when the sound is disturbing your mind, you have a perfect meditation object. Why is it perfect? Because you don't like it. Because you think somehow you have to fix it; that somehow you can make everything better by chasing it away. You are thinking something like, "all I have to do is go somewhere else where there is no sound." You are in the mode of trying to fix, trying to control, trying to satisfy your partiality. For this very reason it's a perfect object of our meditation, since by meditating on it you have the potential to change these habits into simple realization of the truth - it's just sound.

I hear many stories of meditators who do this when they go home, when their family members are yelling and arguing, for example. They simply say to themselves, "hearing", "hearing" and, whereas normally they would get into an argument and cause even more suffering, they find that they are actually at peace in their minds, even while someone is shouting in their ear - "hearing", "hearing", and it's just sound. At that moment, there is wisdom - pure, unadulterated wisdom.

I have told the story before about how I once saw a monk enter into cessation while we watched. He didn't intend to, I don't think; he was just explaining the meditation practice, but he must also have been practising as he taught. He explained that when you hear, you should say "hearing", "hearing". As he said this, his whole body suddenly froze, even his hand that was pointing at his ear. After almost a minute, he came back and sent the meditator to continue with their practice as though nothing had happened. Because he himself was undertaking the practice, then and there, his mind was able to let go and become free from the phenomenological world for a moment.

Wisdom is to see things as they are. It's easy to hear that,

and to agree with it, but the key is to understand it for yourself, to see things as they are is just simply, for what they are. If the stomach is rising, wisdom means to know it simply as a rising motion:

paṭissatimattāya - with specific and exact remembrance of the object for what it is,

anissito ca viharati - dwelling independent of the object,

na ca kiñci loke upādiyati - not clinging to anything in the world.

So when you consider of the meditation practice, this activity where you are required to practice walking slowly or sitting still and repeating a mantra, before you entertain the view that somehow this mundane activity is obstructing your path to spiritual attainment and supermundane wisdom, you should consider carefully what sort of wisdom you're looking for if not understanding of mundane reality for what it is.

The meditation really is supposed to create obstructions. It's meant to obstruct our habitual clinging to pleasant experiences like deep states of tranquillity that we think of as stable and permanent and satisfying; it's meant to obstruct our judgemental and analytical mind, keeping us from speculating about the past or future. It is meant to keep us from falling into all intellectual and emotional traps, to keep us seeing reality just as it is, without investigating or complicating it in any way. Without a constant reminder of ultimate mundane reality, it will be difficult to keep ourselves from clinging to pleasant experiences, since they feel very much like the goal of the practise; the meditation technique we use is designed to keep us from wasting time cultivating states that have nothing to do with reality.

This simplicity is difficult to appreciate, and often a meditator will think such a practise is actually detrimental to their spiritual development because of how it stops them from dwelling on pleasant or profound states. It can even happen that a meditator, knowing they must contemplate on impermanence, suffering, and non-self, will come to complain that they are unable to observe the truth because they're too busy watching their stomach. Meditators actually quite often come to complain that their observation of the

stomach is unstable, unsatisfying, stressful, and totally uncontrollable; how can we possibly hope to understand impermanence, suffering, and non-self, they ask, if we have deal with such obstacles?

You see how silly such thinking is? Such people are successfully engaged in the process of understanding impermanence, suffering, and non-self on a fundamental level, but some may actually run away from the practice because they think that it isn't real meditation; they say such things as, "I'm suffering and you want me to stay with my problems? You want me to look at all of the negative things I have inside? I thought the purpose of meditation was to leave the negative things behind, why are we turning around and looking at them? The last thing I want to do is look at them!"

Some meditators even come up with the idea that watching the objects of experience actually feeds them, making them worse. Sometimes it may be the case that a negative phenomenon does become stronger as one observes it, and this can be terribly discouraging for a new meditator who thinks the object of the noting is to dispel the unpleasant phenomena. So we ask, do you want things to get worse? "No, I don't". Then, we ask, can you say that it truly belongs to you, if it gets worse when you wish for it to get better?

Some meditators may focus on pain, reminding themselves of it as "pain", "pain", and then come and complain that when they do this the pain just gets stronger. They are under the impression that noting is supposed to make the pain go away, just like any other "cure" for suffering. When your mind is in a certain state it may happen that everything you acknowledge does disappear quickly, but there isn't anything intrinsically "right" about that state or "wrong" about a state of mind that amplifies every experience. All it means that the factors that brought you to such a moment are arising in that way - they are not under your control in either case.

This is actually the most important aspect of our practice - to see that we can't control even our own state of mind; to see that we've built up so many expectations and partialities that we can't help but fall into uncontrollable suffering every time

something goes contrary to our expectations; to see this bed that we've made for ourselves; to see this nest, this house that we've built for ourselves. We build a home for ourselves in the mind. Whatever seeds you sow, so is the fruit you reap. This was said by the Buddha, at least five-hundred years before it was written down in Christian texts - "yādisaṃ vapate bījaṃ, tādisaṃ harate phalaṃ. (SN 11.10)"

From the meditation practice itself, we see that doing good deeds leads to good results and doing bad deeds leads to bad results. It's not an intellectual teaching. You reap what you sow. We may ask ourselves, "is it really true?" We see all these rich people who do such horrible things and don't see them reaping anything, except more good; this makes us wonder whether cause and effect really works. If you think intellectually about karma, it can certainly cause a lot of doubt. When you start to look for complex truths, you find many problems. But the simple truth is that when you give rise to a negative mind state, suffering is the only result you can expect. Ask yourself, when you get angry, when you get greedy, when you are conceited or arrogant, how do you feel? Does it form a habit or does it not form a habit?

Suppose you are sitting and you have pain, and you adjust your position. You think, "oh, that was nice, that worked." So you think, "wow, this is the truth of suffering, isn't it?" You get the idea that the truth of suffering is sitting still on a meditation mat, and so all you have to do to be free from suffering is not sit on a meditation mat. When the suffering comes, what's the path that leads to the cessation of suffering? Moving. Massaging. Stretching. This, you think, is the path to the cessation of suffering, only the suffering always comes back again, and when it does do you think you will be less inclined to move or more inclined to move? Of course, you will be more inclined. Habits are not static. You become more averse to the feeling; more set in the view that you can and should try your best to avoid suffering, that it's under your control.

We think that all we have to do is find that magic button. It's the same with mindfulness. We think if we find the magical button, we'll be mindful all the time. We think we're doing something wrong when we're not mindful. We beat

ourselves up over it and so it becomes worse, the pain becomes stronger and the aversion becomes stronger. Through meditation practice, we begin to see what we're doing, that we're actually causing the suffering. We see that there is no way to set up our lives so that we can be permanently happy, permanently satisfied.

There is only one way to be truly happy, and that's to be "anissito", as the Buddha taught; to dwell independent of the objects of experience. It's such a simple truth that there is nothing much to explain. "Don't cling, you won't suffer" - it's not even hard to understand. "These things are impermanent" - who can't understand that? The truth is what you're left with once you give up everything else. This is why the Buddha said right view is the giving up of wrong view. When he talked about views at all he would almost always be talking about wrong view - right view is just the absence of views.

The person who has right view is one who has given up all wrong views and so has no views. What do they have instead? They have knowledge. When the stomach is rising, they know the stomach is rising. It's hard to believe that just this is wisdom, but can you do it? When the stomach is rising, do you know the stomach is rising? Or do you think "oh, this meditation is boring, having to sit on this mat and repeat these words to myself! How many minutes are left? Is this really right for me? Wouldn't I be better off on the beach?"

It's very hard for us just to stay with the reality of the experience, because it's so incredibly simple. Meditation removes all defilements from the mind, and so our defilements scream out against it every time we try to meditate. It's like trying to find a light switch in a dark room. Turning on a light is a very simple thing to do, but when you're bumping around in the darkness, it can be much easier said than done. If you just flail around blindly, or spend all your time afraid or wondering how to escape the room without even thinking about turning on a light, you have little hope of leaving the room unhurt. All it takes is to turn on the light and suddenly your difficulties are over. When you can see your way and know what's in front of you,

you obviously won't bump into anything. Likewise, when you see the stomach rising and falling, the pain, thoughts, or the emotions just as they are, how could you suffer from them? Once you see reality for what it is, how could you possibly suffer from anything?

When you know that the rain is about to soak you, then all you have to do is just know it for rain. Does it cause suffering? No. The suffering is in "uh-oh, I'm going to get wet," and the aversion to getting wet that we have built up inside - the habitual aversion to letting yourself get soaked by the rain. I used to go on alms round in the morning and the other monks would laugh and say, "where is your umbrella?" I'd be soaking wet and I'd say, "it's just water!" Actually I was just too lazy to carry an umbrella, and so would get caught when it started to rain, but it made me realize that being soaked looks a lot worse than it actually is, only because we are so horrified to think of it.

We have so many preconceived notions about everything. The mantra itself, and the meditation itself, is something that's very hard for people to accept, because they think it's limiting. "How are you ever going to give rise to understanding if you're just brainwashing yourself like this?" We were joking earlier about the word brainwashing. Every time I hear it I always think, "yeah, that really is what we're doing, we're here brainwashing ourselves." Scary, isn't it? When we hear the word brainwashing, immediately the warning signals go off in our minds. Very hard to accept, isn't it? But that's really what we're doing here - not brainwashing in a classical sense, I suppose, if you look it up in the dictionary, but we're very simply washing the defilements from our minds.

They say brainwashing is bad because it gets rid of your inhibitions, right? So, you brainwash someone, then they can go and kill people. Why? Because they've lost their fear or their knowledge that it's a bad thing to do. That is a pretty simplistic description of what goes on in classical brainwashing, though. Classical brainwashing - the act of softening the mind's prejudices, is only the first step in teaching people to kill; it generally takes a secondary role to actual conditioning, where the subject is given new

prejudices about things like killing, justice, etc. While it is true that the receptive state of the brainwashed victim is what allows such reprogramming, the problem is not precisely in the brainwashed state itself. Nor is Buddhist "brainwashing" susceptible to such reconditioning, since it is based on rigorous investigation of the truth for oneself. Classical brainwashing relies on the victim's emotional dependence on affection, loyalty, patriotism, etc. to convince them of something they would otherwise reject. Truly "washing the brain", on the other hand, removes all dependence on such emotional hooks, and so leaves one impervious to any conditioning that could take advantage of the "unprejudiced" state.

In a sense, we are indeed giving up even prejudices about good and evil in our practice. The Buddha himself talked about an enlightened being going beyond good and evil. To just see things as they are, not having any expectations, to not have any wants or needs and just take things as they come, knowing them as they are, actually means going beyond good and evil. This doesn't mean not being able to tell the difference or of doing evil deeds without compunction, since that would require ignorance; it means not desiring to do either good or evil deeds, out of knowledge that no true benefit can come from either.

An enlightened being will appear to be full of good deeds, unflagging in their effort to work for the benefit of themselves and other beings. On close inspection, however, it is clear that they only act out of conformity to the truth, having no expectations or desires for either positive or negative results. They act solely based on what is appropriate - what causes the least friction and stress, out of pure wisdom and understanding that could not allow them to act inappropriately, just as seeing the objects in a well-lit room clearly would naturally prevent a person from bumping into them.

You don't need anything special to become enlightened; you don't need much knowledge or study. The study we need to undertake is the study of ourselves, the study of good and bad experience. We have to become purely objective, rigorous in our examination of reality as it is, not as we

would like it to be. The technique we use is one of strict impartiality, and it is this adherence to strict impartiality that keeps us progressing towards the goal in all circumstances so we can see that, no matter what arises, it is not special in any way.

My teacher once reminded us of this impartiality with a special mantra that we were to repeat when we thought we had come across something special; the mantra was "this is not that." It's not a mantra to be repeated as a meditation practice but when something comes up and you think it may be what you are looking for you should repeat to yourself "this is not that" - meaning it's not special. Nothing that arises will be outside of the realm of meditation practice; nothing will be proper to cling to, to investigate or analyze, or proliferate. "This is not that" means it's not that which you're looking for. For beginner meditators, "this is not that" may be difficult to understand, but once you've practised for some time you will understand that it's indeed not - none of this is - that. It's all this, it is what it is. This is this.

The rising of the stomach is rising, the falling is falling. Standing is standing, sitting is sitting. The experience is the experience - it is what it is. All we try to do in the meditation practice is remind ourselves of this truth, setting ourselves in it, straightening our mind until it's all our mind knows. It is what it is. That's wisdom - realizing that all of the ideas we have about reality are false. All of our conceptions, the tags and labels that we put on things, they're all false. That this could satisfy, that it is good, that it is bad, that it is permanent, that it is me, that it is mine - all of these are just concepts that take flourish only in our minds with no grounding in reality whatsoever.

Our possessions, our belongings, our friends, our families are all just concepts. Through meditation, we come to see reality as it is - we actually see the truth for ourselves. We see that the rain is just an experience of rain. Life is experience of life, death is experience of death. We see, and we know. We know clearly. "pariññāta" - the truth becomes completely understood. "pari" is a good word, it means "all around" like a circle. Our knowledge - our wisdom - must be like a complete circle. We have to know suffering completely

as it is. Our knowledge of suffering has to be all-encompassing. This is what we gain from the practice; we come to see, not that our experiences are unpleasant or harmful to us, but that they're useless.

Experiences are meaningless - they are not a source of true happiness or peace. Even when we attain enlightenment, we can still live with them and amongst them, experiencing them as usual, only we will never cling to them; we will stop trying to find happiness in them. Even intellectual analysis, views and opinions - all of this we will discard in favour of simple wisdom that knows reality for what it is.

All of our thoughts and ideas, beliefs and opinions - they aren't wisdom. Wisdom is seeing that beliefs are just beliefs, views and thoughts are just views and thoughts. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking are what they are. This is simple wisdom, getting rid of all of the baggage that we carry and retaining only pure awareness of reality as it is. That's what enlightenment is about, getting lighter. Enlightenment is not just turning on a light, it's about giving up the weight. The Buddha said, "bhārā have pañcakkhandhā, bhārahāro ca puggalo (SN 22.22)" - the five aggregates are indeed a heavy burden, and it is us who have to carry them around. Once we stop clinging to them, reifying and judging them, only then will we find true wisdom and enlightenment.

Through the practise, our minds will become light and free. This is really all that the Buddha had to offer to us. The Buddha found perfect simplicity; he found perfect rectitude of mind - straightness. His mind became perfectly straight, so that he was able to cut through delusion like a knife. When your mind is crooked you can't cut, you can't point - you can only cling. When you purify the mind, nothing can cling to it; all experience will be like water off a lotus flower - even though the lotus grows surrounded by water and pelted by rain, it doesn't ever become waterlogged. In the same way, the mind that sees things as they are is not affected by experience even when living an ordinary life in an ordinary world. This is the simple truth.

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