Ask a Monk
SERIES

Meditation Q&A

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Meditation Q&A

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Foreword

This is one book in a series of books based on the Ask a Monk video series published on YouTube by Venerable Yuttadhammo Bhikku. The intent of the book series is to present a curated compilation of questions and answers in a written form based on the Ask a Monk series, where each book is organized around a topic. A dedicated group of volunteers from the Sirimangalo International Buddhist Meditation Society aided in curating, transcribing, and editing of each book in collaboration with Venerable Yuttadhammo Bhikku.

This book on meditation is meant to be a companion to the previous published books, “How to Meditate: a Beginner’s Guide to Peace” and “How to Meditate II” by Venerable Yuttadhammo Bhikku. Both publications are available on the Sirimangalo.org website (sirimangalo.org).

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Why Everyone Should Meditate - 5 Reasons

The practice of meditation allows us to live our lives free from suffering. It allows us to give up grasping and clinging so that everywhere and anywhere we can be truly happy, at peace with ourselves and the world around us. This is because meditation benefits us in five ways, as follows.

1. Meditation purifies the mind.

What does it mean to have a pure mind? A pure mind involves mental clarity. Our minds give rise to many different conflicting mind states. Some mind states bring happiness and some bring suffering. There are three general characteristics of mind states that bring suffering: positively inclined states (greed, wanting, etc.), negatively inclined states (anger, disliking, hatred, etc.), and neutral states (association without judgment). These states are considered to be mental impurities because they cause suffering. They cause us to perform harmful deeds towards others and ourselves. Positively inclined states lead to addiction. Negatively inclined states lead to immediate mental suffering. Neutral states involve ideas of possession (me and mine), concepts, views, and conceit – ideas which lead us to hold ourselves higher than others or put ourselves down.

Meditation helps to overcome unwholesome mind states that arise. When we see something, we may like it (positive) or dislike it (negative) or create some kind of idea of self-righteousness or conceit related to it (neutral). Each moment we practice meditation we create a clear state of awareness instead of reacting to the experience. When we see something, we simply remind ourselves that it is seeing, that *this* is an experience of seeing. When we feel pain, we remind ourselves that it is pain and simply create the clear awareness of it as “pain.” When we do this, our minds are diverted from the habitual next step of reacting to the experience, as they are fixed on the ultimate reality of the experience *as it is*, neither good nor bad, not me or mine, etc; it simply is. This is what it means to purify the mind by creating clear awareness. The purity that comes from clear awareness is the first benefit of meditation; it helps us to get rid of anger, addiction, and all sorts of conceit, and allows us to move away from the unwholesome mind states that cause suffering.

2. Meditation allows us to overcome mental illness.

Mental illness refers not only to states that cause one to enter a psychiatry ward. Mental illness refers to any sort of mental distress or disease. In this sense, we understand disease as “dis-ease”, not being at ease. States like depression, stress, anxiety— all these are mental illnesses that can cause such great suffering as to lead those who suffer from them to seek solutions like pills, therapy, and other external means of temporarily removing them from our minds. Unfortunately, these solutions generally fall short of a full cure as they do not engage directly with the root cause of mental illness, the mind.

Meditation practice is the most successful means of overcoming mental illness, because it does engage directly with the mind. We do not ever have to take medication for something which is purely mental; we can eradicate, on our own, states of mind like depression, stress, anxiety, insomnia, worry, fear—without any need to see a clinical therapist or doctor. Without training in meditation, one may never realize that we have such an incredible tool that allows us to rid ourselves of harmful mind states on a real and profound level.

When we practice meditation, creating clear remembrance of the present reality at every moment, we evoke mind states that foster a new way of looking at the world. Instead of perceiving our experiences as problems—stressful, depressing, fearful, etc.—we simply see them as they are. Before our mind is able to judge the experience, we say to ourselves, “seeing, seeing”, “hearing, hearing”, “thinking, thinking”, etc., and there is no opportunity for reactionary states like stress, depression, or fear to arise. We can even note “stressed, stressed”, “depressed, depressed”, or “afraid, afraid”, and the chain reaction that causes those states to overwhelm us is cut off, causing them to fall away naturally. By reminding ourselves in this way that experiences are just what they are, unhealthy mind states have no opportunity to become a habitual response to a particular experience. Instead, we develop a new habit of seeing things simply as they are. Because of the change in perspective that comes from such practice over the long term, bad habits are abandoned and mental illness is overcome directly.

In this way, meditators successfully overcome issues like insomnia, depression, suicidal ideation, alcoholism, and all sorts of addictions and harmful mind states, often through simple direction and encouragement from a qualified meditation teacher. Everyone experiences mental

dis-ease of various forms to some degree, and for this reason everyone should practice meditation.

3. Meditation does away with suffering.

There are two kinds of suffering that exist. The first kind of suffering is bodily suffering—suffering caused by pain in our back, our legs, our head, our stomach, and various other parts of the body. The other kind of suffering is mental suffering. This kind of suffering is the distress that comes from mental illness as discussed above. When we feel anguish in the mind, it can be much worse than physical pain. Meditation is able to do away with both of these kinds of suffering; it allows us to understand that physical pain is just a part of our existence—that physical discomfort is actually not an uncomfortable thing, and that mental discomfort is caused by our unnecessary judgment of experiences like pain and discomfort.

Physical pain is simply a phenomenon which arises and ceases; there is nothing intrinsic to pain that tells us that it is bad, it is simply the brain telling us that there is pain. The mind itself makes a judgment of our experiences as good or bad. The mind can be trained to interpret phenomena in any number of ways. For example, it is possible to perceive pain as a good thing, a pleasurable experience, even. In meditation, we learn to see pain as simply pain. When we experience pain we say to ourselves, “pain, pain...”, reminding ourselves that it is just pain, rather than allowing it to produce stress and suffering. We do not have to experience pain as negative, something to get rid of or do away with.

The reason we are unable to experience pain as it is without reacting to it is because we normally lack the right tool. Meditation is that tool; it allows us to come to the realization of seeing things as they actually are. When we see the objects of experience clearly as they are, we are able to free ourselves from suffering.

Less obvious than suffering from pain, but perhaps more pervasive, is suffering as a result of thinking. When we think about something, recall memories, or worry about the future, we may feel sadness, anger, excitement, anticipation, etc. Our judgments complicate all of our many experiences that are actually completely neutral. When we say to ourselves in our mind, “thinking, thinking...”, we remind ourselves that thought is just thought. We see thinking simply

as it is. When we say to ourselves, “worrying, worrying...”, we see that there is nothing actually worth worrying over. We see that the experience is not under our control, we cannot change it or make it accord with our wishes. If our mind is clear, It simply arises and falls away without leading to stress or suffering.

Many physical ailments arise from stress and the buildup of tension within the body. Meditation can permanently relieve this tension. Though it may take time for the mind to let go of the stress, in the end pain caused by stress can be cured completely. Changing our perspective to see the pain as just pain is part of the letting go that allows for healing. It is common for those who have suffered stress-based illnesses with which doctors could not help them come to realize that the illness is based on stress, and when they do away with the stress, they do away with the illness.

Meditation allows us to free ourselves from suffering, both physical and mental. Some may say that suffering is actually an important part of life and that, without suffering, we would not learn anything or that life would be less interesting. It is absolutely true that suffering does offer us opportunities to learn, but we rarely take the time to truly understand anything from it. Meditation is the tool that allows us to truly learn everything there is to know about suffering. Once we have learned all there is to know about suffering, there will be no reason for us to suffer anymore.

4. Meditation helps you follow the right path.

There are many different paths in life; you can practice a path which leads to suffering, you can practice one that is charitable and moral. There are many meditative lifestyles — yoga, tai chi, various traditions in Hinduism or even in the western religions that teach you to fix and focus your mind on a single object, leading to great states of peace and tranquility. These meditative or religious practices are not what we consider to be the right path. It is not that any of these meditative paths are “wrong”, it is just that these paths are not what is meant by the “right path”, just as the meaning of “right path” is not the path of becoming a monk, a Buddhist, a lawyer, a doctor, etc. All of these paths exist and may be good or bad; they simply are not the “right path” according to the Buddha.

The right path of the Buddha relates to the quality of one's mind. It involves perfect clarity and understanding of reality as it really is. It is called the path because it leads to the goal of freedom from suffering. Mindfulness meditation leads to freedom from suffering because it puts us on the right path by helping us to see clearly, purifying our minds from the defilements that cloud and distort our perception. Whether we choose the path of a lawyer or doctor, Christian or Buddhist, whatever path we choose — once we create this clarity of mind and understand things as they are, we do not give rise to greed and attachment, which would color our perception. We do not give rise to anger, which would inflame our mind. We do not give rise to delusion and conceit and views, which would muddle our mind and confuse us. We simply understand things as they are, as they arise.

Slowly but surely, through mindfulness meditation practice you will find yourself better able to help yourself and others. You will be able to work, study, and live more efficiently than ever before, simply by understanding reality more clearly than before. That is what wisdom means: to understand things as they are, not as we want them to be or want them not to be, not understanding things in terms of our mental defilements or impurities. Once we come to clearly see things as they are, we have found the right path. The right path involves knowing the difference between the path which leads to our development and the path which leads to our destruction. Being on the right path does not mean that we should live our lives in a certain way, but that when we do live our lives, we see our way to make the right decisions.

5. Meditation makes you free.

We practice meditation to gain freedom. We call this Nirvana, which is the highest sort of freedom. Freedom not to suffer, freedom from defilement and mental impurity, freedom from addiction, hatred, bigotry, freedom from wrong views, conceit, and all sorts of unpleasant, unwholesome, unskillful and useless states of mind—total freedom.

It is not freedom to *do* anything. Of course, you are always free to do what you want, but true freedom can severely limit the things that you decide to do, because a lot of the things we decide to do are actually based on delusion or ignorance and lead to suffering. Freedom according to Buddhism is not freedom *to*—it is freedom *from*. Real and true freedom is like a

bird in flight; not clinging to anything, taking its two wings as its only possessions. Wherever we go and whatever situation that we are in, mindfulness allows us not to attach to anything—not people, places or things. Meditation helps us live our lives, whatever our situation, and not be caught up with “should be”, “should not be”, “wish it were”, “wish it weren’t”, or any kind of judgment whatsoever. A mindful person lives like a bird; wherever they go, they eat the fruit from the tree upon which they land.

The practice of meditation is something that you have to practice by yourself. It is not something that you can just take anyone’s word for. With a little bit of time and a little bit of patience, you yourself will come to understand the benefits of meditation.

Two Ways of Seeing

Our practice is called *vipassanā-bhāvanā* or *vipassanā* meditation, and the goal is to attain vipassana. *Passanā* means seeing, and *vi* implies that it is in a special or exceptional way.

The word *vipassanā* implies that there are two ways of seeing and that one of the ways is superior to the other. *Vipassanā* means seeing the three characteristics: impermanence, suffering, and non-self (*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*). The other way of seeing is the opposite; it is the ordinary way of seeing: *nicca* (stability or permanency), *sukha* (happiness or satisfaction), and *atta* (self).

Our ordinary way of seeing things — without *vipassanā*— gives primacy to *things.* We could say “concepts”, but we are more familiar with *things* because we do not realize that things are just concepts. People, places, things, possessions, entities — the way we look at reality gives primacy to these concepts as impersonal, unshakable, unchanging *things*, taking our attention away from the truth, the reality of experience.

We do not trust our senses because the impression we get from them might be wrong; rather than not trust our senses themselves, however, we should simply not trust the impressions or conclusions we draw from our senses. This is an important distinction. We normally mistrust our senses entirely, letting science tell us what is reality. Science has wonderful ways of explaining the reality of entities to us; molecules, atoms, subatomic particles, etc. We think that *things* exist, and more practically we think that the things that we can see

(people, places, objects, and possessions) exist. Direct experience is relegated to a kind of epiphenomenon, like a by-product of *things.* It's no wonder that we have this false sense of stability, satisfaction, and control — a false sense of existence, of there being *things* or a self, me, mine, you, him and her... *things*.

This ordinary way of looking at reality is problematic because whether or not we trust our senses, they take precedence over *things*. Atoms or subatomic particles as *things* have no bearing on our stress or happiness, on everything that is truly important. It is not important which paradigm is "correct". It is important that our ordinary way of seeing is not helpful—harmful even—as it relegates our experience to an inferior position that we disregard because of how fallible our impressions of experience can be. In doing so, we ignore what is most basic to our existence.

The other way of looking at reality is to see beyond the conceptual realm of *things* — reminding ourselves that *things* do not exist. Take the body for example: does the body exist? We know from science that the body is made up of cells; does the body exist in the same way as cells do? No matter how big or how small *things* are, or how finely they are divided into parts, their existence never reaches the level of reality of experiences.

Everything that we know relating to *things* is based on experience. Without experience, nothing else is truly meaningful. Experience is always primary. *Things* are secondary and depend on our experience. There is subjectivity with *things* because two people can look at the same *thing* and have very different ideas about it, whether it is good, bad, beautiful, ugly, etc. Experiences are objective, as they maintain their nature no matter what we perceive them to be. Experiential reality is also more useful because all of the problems in life, like depression, anxiety, addiction, etc., are not a part of *things*; they are a part of experiences.

Putting experiences first changes our entire outlook on life. That is what *vipassanā* means—gaining a new perspective by changing what we put as primary in our outlook. We still acknowledge the conceptual existence of people, places, and things, as they are quite necessary for practical life. At the same time, we become in touch with the reality of our experiences to the extent that we are no longer distracted by conceptual thought. As a result, we are able to see through our conceptual misunderstandings about reality, especially regarding the three characteristics.

The three characteristics are quite difficult to understand when we think in terms of *things*. What does it mean to say that some-*thing* is unstable? The very nature of things is that they are stable, able to satisfy, and subject to our control. Unfortunately, because *things* are conceptual and experiences are real, we are never actually able to find stability, satisfaction, and control.

Experiences are not stable, they arise and cease quite rapidly. As a result of this, they are unable to be a source of satisfaction in the way we perceive things to be. Likewise, we cannot say they have self-ness or substance to them, nor can they be taken as possessions or a part of another self; they are simply experiences.

When we see reality as experiences, we let go of addiction because we no longer conceive of *things* that might satisfy us. We stop seeing in terms of *things* which would have the potential in our minds to satisfy us—if it were only possible to experience them instead of momentary experiences.

Things are not what we experience, we experience experience. We experience seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking. Because experiences are required for enjoying *things* and experiences are unstable, there is really nothing that can truly satisfy us. Worse, experiences are not under our control; they do not belong to us. Thus, clinging to anything becomes futile and a cause for great disappointment and dissatisfaction.

This is the simple truth about the nature of reality. All questions about self and non-self — “does the self exist?”, etc., are totally off-base questions, because the questions are based on the perception of *things*. Non-self simply means that experiences do not belong to you, they are not you, they are not a *you*, they are not a *thing*, an entity. They are experiences that arise and cease. This understanding is not about realizing that the *things* you thought were permanent are impermanent. It is true that this is one way of explaining impermanence in a very superficial way, but true understanding is much deeper than that, or at least very different from that. The three characteristics mean that you change the way you look at reality from *things* that are stable, satisfying and controllable— which people, places and *things* are—to seeing in terms of experiences, which are impermanent, unsatisfying, uncontrollable.

This may sound like a bad deal. You may ask why you would want to trade in a perception of reality based on stability, satisfaction, and control for one based on the opposite. Indeed, perceiving *things* is good in a worldly sense: as a result of our conventional framework of reality we can build nuclear reactors, space stations and computers; however, this has no bearing on our happiness or suffering because again, in terms of what is good for us, experience is primary. If you live in the world of concepts or *things*, you are going to get burnt because you are ignoring the underlying reality of impermanence, suffering, and non-self.

If, instead, you see through the lens of experience, you are invulnerable to disappointment or upset, as you are truly living in reality, keeping up with reality instead of fighting or living in fear of it. Suddenly you fit with the world, with reality. You become natural, you become in tune with nature. There is no dissonance between you and reality, no worry about the future or sadness about the past, both are all caught up in concepts, *things*, and self. Experience is always only present, here and now, being born and dying every moment.

The practice of mindfulness based on the four foundations of mindfulness is meant to help us see reality from the point of view of experience, as follows:

- Physical experience: when you walk , “stepping right”, there is an experience there. There are many experiences in walking; the right foot is one experience and then the left foot is another experience. When you sit and you say, “rising, falling”, those are each physical experiences.
- Feelings: When you feel pain and you focus on the pain and say, “pain, pain...” for as long as it lasts, you see it as experience, many moments of experience.
- Thoughts: Thinking about past or future events, you see thoughts not as “my past” or “my future”, but rather as experiences of thinking. Likewise, good thoughts and bad thoughts become merely thoughts, as you let go of any conceiving about the thoughts.
- Mind states: when you like something, dislike something, or experience other mind states like drowsiness, distraction, worry, anxiety, doubt, etc., instead of being tortured or controlled by them and having to take drugs or medication to alleviate them, you see them just as they are, as experiences. We take drugs and medication because we perceive our mind states as problems. When our mind states are extreme, we take medication as a means of fixing the perceived problem. If you can see your mind states

just as part of your experience, it doesn't matter how intense or overwhelming they are. They just are. They are experiences. We are so accustomed to reacting and thinking of emotions as *my* emotions as *me* experiencing the emotions and even as the emotions being *things* or a part of ourselves—like people say "I have depression", "I am depressed", or "I am clinically depressed". Depression is an emotion that arises for a moment and then is gone; because it comes and goes repeatedly, we perceive it to be a lasting entity, a *thing*. It is only when we lose sight of the momentary reality of experiences that we suffer from things like depression. The same goes for most mental illnesses.

- The senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking all have great power to torture us, which is kind of silly because seeing is really just seeing. How is it that when you see a spider, you freak out or when you see something ugly, you become nauseous? Whatever you see, it is merely an experience of seeing. We are conditioned to react to our experiences, or rather, we condition ourselves and are encouraged by external influences to become conditioned. Mindfulness is about becoming unconditioned, objective, seeing things as they are, and becoming in tune with reality.

Seeing clearly (*vipassanā*) and mindfulness (*sati*) are the two most important parts of our practice. We practice mindfulness to see clearly; when we see reality clearly as it is, we free ourselves from all the suffering of our ignorance and delusion about the nature of our minds and the experiential world around us.

Noting Technique Q&A

Awareness or Noting?

Q: *Why is it not enough to just be aware of the phenomena that arise without noting them?*

A: More important than "What is enough?" is an answer to the question, "What is better?" It may be "enough" to simply be aware of a phenomenon, but it is better to apply mindfulness to it. In our tradition, mindfulness is defined as the grasping of the object as it is—a quality that may or may not be present in ordinary awareness. The real question is, without reminding oneself of the objective nature of the phenomenon (i.e. noting,) how can one be sure one is observing the phenomenon objectively?

Commonly, new meditators have a natural disinclination to note. It is more comfortable to allow one's awareness to stand unimpeded rather than to train the mind in the precision of identifying the object. The question of which is better is open for debate, but one should not let their own prejudice be the deciding factor either way.

The essential quality of *vipassanā* meditation is *sati*. *Sati* means "to remember, recollect or remind oneself of something". According to the Visuddhimagga, its proximate cause is *thirasaññā* which means "firm recognition". Whereas recognition (*saññā*) is present in ordinary experience, noting is understood to augment and stabilize this recognition, preventing the mind from wavering in its objective observation.

While reminding oneself of the nature of phenomena in this way may not always be comfortable or feel natural, it is understood to be more reliably objective. The mental activity involved in producing a label for the object prevents any alternative judgment or extrapolation of the object. Put another way, it is inevitable that the mind will give rise to some sort of label for every experience anyway; noting is a means of ensuring that the label is objective.

If one experiences aversion or doubt about the technique, it is enough to note these mind states. They are undeniably hindrances to meditation practice, whereas noting is not. If one is able to overcome one's aversion and doubt by noting "disliking, disliking" or "doubting, doubting", it can be assured that one will become comfortable with it and see the benefit in the noting technique for oneself. If one is unable to do so, one is welcome to seek out other techniques in other traditions.

What to Note

Q: *When many phenomena are present, which phenomenon should one note?*

A: One should note what is most prevalent in one's field of awareness. The particular object one notes is far less important than the fact that one is noting. It is not necessary to try to catch every phenomenon, as noting is just a means of cultivating objectivity. If one tries to note every phenomenon that arises, one will become overwhelmed and unable to maintain objective observation. Noting should therefore be used to augment one's ordinary perception at a rate that is comfortable and consistent, generally not more frequently than once per second.

How Long to Note?

Q: *For how long should one note a single phenomenon?*

A: Unwholesome phenomena such as liking, disliking, worry, fear, doubt, etc., should be noted until they go away. Unwholesome-triggering phenomena like pain, pleasure, or any object one finds interesting, exciting, fearsome, or otherwise productive of judgment of any kind, should be noted for as long as the mind remains interested or until they disappear of their own accord, whichever comes first. In the case of neutral phenomena, one can still note them repeatedly in order to develop familiarity with their nature of arising and passing away.

Noting Knowing

Q: *What should one do if one cannot find a name for an arisen phenomenon?*

A: In most cases, either "knowing" or "feeling" is accurate enough to create objective awareness of any phenomenon that is not as easily categorizable as seeing, hearing, etc.

Q: *What should one do when a phenomenon is so brief one is only aware of it after it has already disappeared?*

A: At that moment there is a knowledge of the disappearance; noting "Knowing, knowing" is enough to prevent any uncertainty or judgment about the object that has already ceased.

Noting Emotions

Q: *In the case of emotion, is it okay to just note "feeling" or is it better to label the specific emotion?*

A: Emotions are complex entities; they generally contain a fleeting mental component and a more lasting physical effect. It is important to separate these two aspects in order to clearly see the reality of the experience. For example, anxiety exists only momentarily in the mind but sometimes appears to persist due to the physical reactions triggered by it. The actual emotion, like anxiety, disliking, liking, fear, worry, etc., should be noted by name for the brief moment that

it arises; the physical aspect of each should be distinguished as being simply “feeling” or in certain cases “pain”, “pleasure”, or “calm.”

Mindfulness without Mental Noting

***Q*:** *I have been practicing mindfulness without mental noting and focusing on the sensations, thoughts, etc. For me it is easier to be mindful this way. What is your opinion on this?*

A: Nobody wants to note. Nobody wants to put words in their head. Why? Because it is difficult.

You have to ask yourself: “What is the purpose of meditation?” Is the purpose of meditation to make things easy or is the purpose in meditation to overcome what is difficult? Some people make the observation that noting “makes it more difficult to recognize the object for what it is,” because noting forces you to see impermanence, suffering and non-self. It forces you to see that things are not as you would like them. It forces you to see your mind's inclination to control things, and then be unable to control them.

Because of the regimented nature of this meditative practice, you are not able to have this smooth mindfulness, which I would just call concentration. The word mindfulness can be used so loosely as to become rather meaningless. It is not a good translation of the word *sati*, which is what we are practicing. The word *sati* means specifically “the recognition of something as it is.” It is caused by something called *thirasañña*. *Sañña* means the recognition of something—this is this, this is that—and *thira* means “firm, strong or fortified.” *Sati* means fortifying the recognition of the object for what it is and this is why we use the noting technique.

The problem is that we do not like it. Noting breaks up the continuity of the mind’s inclinations. The stream of habitual clinging to conceit, craving, and to the ideas of self are disrupted. The whole idea that “something is easier for me” implies a preference and possibly an identification with the experience that “it is me meditating, it is me being mindful.” The practice of noting results in you feeling like you are forcing the experience. The experience feels jarring, chaotic and uncontrollable, which is the actual reality of it. Noting forces you to see that. Noting itself is not uncomfortable, it is the discord between the way we would like things to be, and the way things really are that feels unpleasant.

Once you come to see things as they are—moment to moment that do not carry on from one moment to the next, then noting becomes a very easy thing to do. Catching things up in your attention one by one becomes natural because you are able to see and accept reality just as it is, without continuous entities, only moment to moment experiences.

Our ordinary perception is of things that continue from moment to moment. Because the mind does not find such things in practice, it becomes quite disturbed by the simple observation of moments of experience. Instead of perceiving the momentary experiences for what they are, it attempts to create stability by force, and it may feel like the noting itself is a use of force, but in actuality it is just our misguided desire for stability and control.

In my opinion, practice without noting is not really *sati*. Why? Because the word *sati* means to remind yourself. *Sati* means the firm recognition that comes from reminding yourself of the object for what it is. The Buddha said, "*Gacchanto vā gacchāmī ti pajānāti*," which means "when walking, one knows fully 'I am walking.'" *Gacchāmī* means "walking" without emphasizing the "I" or the "me". It is the simplest way to focus one's attention on the object. *Jānāti* means "one knows" and the *pa-* prefix means "fully", which implies an exceptional sort of knowing beyond the ordinary sense that "it is me who is walking".

Instead of noting, I try to use the word "mantra" to describe this practice. Mantra is a word that we already know; mantra meditation is a very ancient practice as a widely accepted means of focusing the mind's attention on an object. Ordinarily, however, the object of mantra meditation is a concept because concepts are stable, satisfying, and controllable. In mindfulness meditation, our focus is on experiential reality, and because experiences are neither stable, satisfying, nor controllable, it can be a source of some distress to the mind seeking out those qualities. The fact that you experience impermanence, suffering and non-self when applying a mantra to things that are impermanent, suffering and non-self is a sign that you are practicing correctly. Feeling uncomfortable as a result of seeing these characteristics of reality is an important part of the training to take you out of your comfort zone, helping you to release your dependency on things that are really not dependable. From our point of view, it is forcing you to look at things objectively.

If you are interested in seeing reality clearly as it is, I can only recommend that you go practice noting the objects. If you prefer something more peaceful, calm, and soothing that takes you away from ordinary reality, then you may have to look elsewhere.

Scanning and Noting

***Q*:** *When I sit and say to myself "sitting", I have to do a quick body scan, at least of my legs and spine, in order to really know that I am indeed sitting. Isn't that quick body scan somewhat contrary to a one point of mind? Is one label really enough?*

A: You do not need to perform any such body scan; trying to force the perception of sitting is not proper meditation because it reinforces the delusion of control. In tranquility meditation it might be okay to control the mind—if your purpose is simply to calm the mind, you can force it, push it, knead it and mold it into shape. Tranquility meditation is not for the purpose of cultivating insight so there is no harm there as far as attaining the goal of tranquility. In *vipassanā* meditation, however, the focus is not the concept of sitting but rather sitting is a description of the feelings that you experience. The fact that you are aware of the tension in your back or the pressure on the floor at that moment when you say “sitting” is enough. You are aware of that experience and you call that experience, “sitting”. It is important to recognize the physical phenomena as they are; it is not so important to be aware that this is a sitting posture.

Put your mind on the entire body and say to yourself “sitting”; the recognition of the sitting posture comes on its own or may not come at all. This is the *saññā* part of *vipassanā*; the recognition that “this is sitting”. *Saññā* (recognition) is unpredictable, and what you are seeing that leads you to say that you “have to push it in order for the recognition to come,” is non-self. The recognition does not always come automatically. Sometimes it does come and you immediately know that you are sitting and you recognize, “this is a sitting posture.” Sometimes you look and look and you never become aware that it is sitting. This is because it is not self. You cannot force yourself to know that it is “sitting” that you are experiencing. Understanding the nature of reality in this way is the purpose of practicing mindfulness.

You will find that sometimes a certain sensation or set of sensations leads to the arising of the recognition that you are sitting; sometimes such a recognition will not arise. Often

meditators believe that something is wrong when they are unable to force the recognition to arise; what they are experiencing, however, is the nature of reality as impermanent, suffering and non-self. The purpose of meditation is to see these characteristics, so in this instance they can be reassured that they are practicing correctly.

Mindfulness and Noting

Q: *What does it mean to note something? What is the thing that you are noting? What is the difference between noting and being mindful if there is any or the relationship between them?*

A: The word mindfulness is an imperfect translation of the word *sati. Sati* is the state of mind that rightly grasps the object in such a way that it can be seen clearly. *Sati* can also be used in a conventional sense as the ability to remember things that happened a long time ago. In meditation, it means the ability to remember the present moment. It means not being distracted by or dwelling in abstract thought.

Abstract thought is not evil or bad, but it is not mindful. In our everyday activities we have to rely on abstract concepts. Many of our ordinary activities will be difficult to perform mindfully because being mindful means only being aware of the moments of experience. It is hard to maintain a stream of conceptual thought when you are mindful. Likewise, when we dwell in abstract thought we are generally unmindful of reality. For example, you are probably sitting while reading this, but you likely have no awareness of that fact while reading. When you are caught up in abstract thought you quickly forget that you are sitting, but when you read “did you know that you are sitting?” suddenly you are reminded that you are sitting. I think this is why the Buddha chose this word *sati* to describe meditation not just as a state but as an activity—remembering. *Sati* is what leads to seeing clearly, and the act of cultivating *sati* is this activity of reminding yourself of your experiential reality.

Abstract thought is useful for cultivating right view. Abstraction is the basis of language, so for someone else to remind us of something, they need to use words that describe abstract concepts. Words themselves are also concepts. The word *sati* does not mean anything; it is just a sound. Its meaning is only conceptual, based on how our minds interpret the sound. We know what *sati* refers to, and based on our faculties of memory and recognition, we associate that word with a certain mind state. The mind state described by *sati* is real; mindfulness is real but

the word mindfulness is just a concept. When I say “mindfulness” it evokes a perception of certain real mind states that are useful and not abstract.

You may find this teaching useful. Teaching is a useful abstraction that can change the way you look at things and allow you to see reality in a different way, but it will never be a replacement for the experience of reality for yourself. It will never be enough. You could listen to all of my talks and it would never be enough, unless you transform the teachings into actual practice that allows you to cultivate the realities described by the teachings. This is where noting comes in; noting is sort of a gateway between the teaching and the mind states. Noting simply means saying a word to yourself that has a connection to the reality you are experiencing at that moment.

When you engage in this practice of saying something to yourself, this is what we call mantra meditation. Mantra meditation is very old; it was around before the Buddha himself, and is widespread and broadly recognized today by many religious, spiritual, and even secular practices as an effective tool because it is the simplest means of focusing the mind in a specific way on a specific object. It is similar to how we use words to express emotion; if I yell at someone and say, “You hurt me!”, it focuses my mind on the anger and self-righteous indignation I feel in that moment, augmenting those mindstates. Words are quite powerful; they have the effect of augmenting our mental states and emotions, often to our detriment.

We speak words in response to many of our experiences in ordinary life. When you like something, you may say to yourself, “This is great!”, which reinforces your attachment to that thing. Mantras make use of this process by which words evoke specific states of mind. Self-help gurus often suggest mantras that help their followers create specific states of mind, stimulating the mind in a particular way. It is not common for someone to intentionally practice with a mantra that stimulates unwholesome qualities like greed or anger, but we often use words that evoke unwholesome mind states unknowingly. This is why meditation can be dangerous. Quite conceivably, you could create a meditation practice that would make you more angry, more greedy, or more deluded. Mantras that stimulate delusion may be the most common, as religious teachings that have wrong views often involve teachings, sayings, mottos, and even mantras that support delusion.

A good meditation may be used to evoke positive emotions; one example that should come to mind for many people is *metta* or “friendliness” meditation, where we use the mantra, “May I be happy; may all beings be happy.” The words themselves are not wholesome but they have the potential to evoke wholesome emotive states like friendliness, compassion and kindness. Other wholesome meditations are designed to cultivate, not emotions, but certain other qualities of mind like focus, or clarity. *Kasiṇa* meditation is a good example. *Kasiṇa* means “totality”; a *kasiṇa* is an object that you use to create a sense of totality, where your whole world is just one thing, like a color for example. You may start by focusing on a circle of white and you just repeat to yourself, “white, white, white...”. The mantra helps evoke a single-pointed attention on the color. White is not anything special but, because it is a simple concept and very singular, focusing on it allows for the cultivation of focused attention. Repeating “white” is not likely to make you angry, greedy, or deluded; it is not going to evoke bad things. Such practice has the potential to help you create very powerful and pure states of mind. Eventually, if you practice such meditation, all you will see, even when you close your eyes, is white. The benefit is this very strong concentrated awareness.

With mindfulness meditation, the purpose of the mantra is to help our minds focus on reality rather than on a concept. We use abstraction (noting) to bring the mind back to reality. It is a unique form of meditation. It may share technical similarities to other types of meditation, but it is unique in application because rather than focusing your attention on another abstraction, the object of the mantra is real or experiential. The word “real” can mean different things but “experiential” means it is a part of experience, which is the essence of ultimate reality in Buddhism.

When you say to yourself “seeing, seeing”, it helps focus your mind on the experience so you remember simply that you are seeing at that moment. There is this awareness and presence that is objective, unlike our ordinary experience of things, which is steeped in judgment and subjectivity. Ordinarily, we recognize that an object has brought us pleasure in the past so we like and conceive of it as positive, or we associate it with a past suffering and dislike it, or we associate it with some view, conceit or arrogance and delusion arises. We might look in the mirror and see ourselves and think, “I am so handsome” or “I am so ugly” and conceit arises, or some view of self like “this is me”, “this is mine”, “this is what I am”.

This practice of reminding yourself of the simple nature of each experience has the potential to remove all of those habits of greed, anger, and delusion. It evokes objective states in our minds. Without mindfulness we respond to experiences with thoughts of “this is bad”, “this is good”, “this is me”, “this is mine”, but with the mindfulness practice you say “this is this”, i.e. “seeing is seeing”, “hearing is hearing”, “thinking is thinking”. This is explicitly what the Buddha taught; what you can read about him teaching time and again. We have shelves of the Buddha's teaching but this very basic teaching is so simple and so ordinary that it often gets overlooked. What is Buddhism? Buddhism is about seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking. We are made up of the five aggregates and they arise at the moment of experiencing any of the six senses. Mindfulness is simply the practice of purifying our perception of these moments of experience so our reactions are in line with reality, rather than partiality or delusion.

It is important not to confuse the act of noting with the states of mind that it evokes. Mindfulness is a tool; it is an artificial tool used to bring the mind closer to reality and become more objective about the reality or the experience. Mindfulness (or noting) is not the objectivity or the awareness. Noting is the tool that you use to evoke certain mind states. If you are anxious and you know that anxiety is composed of different physical and mental states, you can still just say “anxious, anxious”. The idea is to help you experience reality with a clear mind; the mantra is not some kind of pill that you swallow or a magical wand that you wave to change reality.

You do not have to apply the technique to every little thing you experience. With anxiety, for example, the whole experience is anxiety but some aspects of it are physical and some are mental. The butterflies that you feel in your stomach, the heart beating quickly, and the tension in your shoulders can all be noted individually, which will help you experience them without reaction or judgment. By simply saying to yourself when you are tense in the shoulders, “tense, tense”, or when you feel there are butterflies in your stomach because you are anxious, saying “feeling, feeling”—the experience does not necessarily go away but it also does not lead to more anxiety. You will see that the practice of noting evokes states of neutrality and objectivity that are not reactive. Reacti some states like anxiety grow.

With anxiety, you start with a thought. For example, I might think “there are 50 people now listening to me talk here” and that thought may evoke certain states of anxiety in the mind, which in turn create feelings in the body. Those feelings in the body may then make me more

anxious. Then I may think, “Oh, I am anxious!” and the feelings and mind states bounce back and forth like this. The physical states lead to more anxiety, more anxiety leads to stronger physical reactions, creating a feedback loop wherein the anxiety becomes stronger and stronger until it can even lead to a full-blown panic attack.

In each moment of anxiety, there is a process occuring; first there is an experience, then there is conceiving about that experience, and finally there is the reaction based on one’s conceptions of the experience. This process can be broken by simply changing one’s conception of the experience; rather than conceiving of the experience as “I am anxious, this is a problem,”, you change the conception to just, “this is anxiety”, or the physical “this is feeling”, by using mantras like “anxious” or “feeling” to remind yourself of the objective nature of the experience, an act which evokes very different states of mind from ordinary conception. The mantra is not magic; it is not in and of itself mindfulness but if used consistently and with proper attention it can evoke states of objectivity and mindfulness that break away from the conceptual process that leads to building up of things like anxiety.

Conceptualization can be useful and the mantra is a useful conceptualization that helps us direct our attention to the object of our experience. In other types of meditation, a mantra is used to direct one’s attention to concepts like “white”. In mindfulness the object is not concepts, but experiential reality. This is an important difference because reality has certain qualities that are not present in concepts: firstly, impermanence; whereas we perceive conceptual objects to be stable in our imagination, experiences arise and cease from moment to moment. Because concepts rely on experiences to arise, our lack of familiarity with the impermanence of reality leads to disappointment when the conceptual things we come to expect cannot be produced on a whim. Through observing experiences directly, we become familiar with the chaotic nature of reality, and the whole idea of expectation becomes absurd. We cannot know what the future will bring and forming expectations in our minds becomes a habit that can only lead to eventual disappointment. There is no benefit to expecting. What does it mean to say, “I want things to be this way!”? All it means is you are cultivating a habit of desire; it does not have any bearing on how things are going to be.

Secondly, mindfulness of experiences provides understanding of suffering. When you try to fix or control your conceptual reality you become stressed and are susceptible to disappointment. Even if you are able occasionally to get whatever you want, you then just want it

more. By keeping the mind present and engaged with your actual experiences, you see this stress and attachment for what it is, realizing that reality admits of no satisfaction for those who cling to concepts or experiences, as they are unpredictable and uncontrollable.

Thirdly, mindfulness shows you non-self; that the conceptual entities we evoke in our minds are merely illusions formed of perception, recognition, and memory. Through mindful observation of experiences, you see that momentary experiences underlie all things—they have no substance beyond our imagination and the experiences that trigger it. As a result of this clarity of vision, we no longer obsess about controlling the world around us, or cling to things as "me" or "mine". We see that this clinging to illusions leads only to suffering.

Our lack of familiarity with these fundamental aspects of nature leads us to conceive of experiences as entities, and those entities as bringing us pleasure or pain, which causes us to react positively or negatively towards them. Through mindfulness we start to see experiences just as experiences. Noting is simply a tool to help evoke a state of mindfulness.

When practicing noting meditation, it is important not to worry too much about the details like whether you are noting everything, or noting the correct thing, or noting something correctly. You do not have to note everything; you do not have to worry about being perfectly correct. We note "sitting, sitting", for example, even though it is not the concept of sitting we are focused on; the noting of sitting focuses your attention on the experience of sitting—the pressure on your bottom, the tension in your back and in your legs, and so on—which is absolutely real. Saying to yourself "sitting, sitting" evokes this objective awareness of the experience. Saying "sitting" is not saying "this is good" or "this is bad"; it is an objective thing to say so, even though it is conceptual and the sitting itself is conceptual, the mantra helps you focus on reality. Anyone who is critical of this should read what the Buddha himself said: "When sitting, know clearly to yourself 'I am sitting'."

Most important is that mantra meditation, or noting meditation, or whatever you call it, is a concrete, easily accessible practice that almost anyone can undertake. Right here and now you can use it to become objectively aware of your own experiences as they truly are. Noting is a very useful tool, but do not let the tool become the object. Do not focus on the noting, thinking "Is it working?", "Why is it not working?", "Why do I say 'pain pain' and the pain does not go away?", "I expect results, why am I not getting them?" You are not getting good results because

of expectation. The mantra is just a tool; the consequent mindfulness is what does the work to free us from suffering.

Is it Still Noting?

Q: *The practice of noting as I understand it involves thought-vocalizing in language the noted phenomenon. Is there also a noting without vocalizing the phenomenon in thought, or is the thought vocalization intrinsic to the practice? Asked another way, if one observes the phenomenon but bypasses the mental annunciation in language of what is observed, does that qualify as noting?*

A: I think there is a bit of a misunderstanding about what is going on in your mind generally. Thinking is an intrinsic part of our mental activity; we are always thinking. The practice of meditation is not the creation of a verbal word; you are not verbalizing anything, rather you are thinking, but the thought is a clear thought; the thought has a one-to-one correlation with reality. For example when you see something, it is not “me”, it is not “mine”, it is not all of the other things that you might think of, rather it is just seeing.

I know there are many people, even experienced meditators, who ask this question or who argue that you are better off to not use the noting, and that is fine; different interpretations and different practices are perfectly acceptable. You could become enlightened without practicing noting and certainly there are different techniques of practice that lead to enlightenment. All I can say is that, in my experience, the benefits of noting should become obvious if you give it a chance.

One problem I see is that, based on our natural inclination to doubt things combined with our natural disinclination towards objectivity, once we start seeing reality as it is the mind revolts and rejects it because it feels “unnatural.” I often hear it expressed that noting practice feels unnatural, but ask yourself, what is natural? Natural is following your defilements; natural is thinking, “This is me, this is mine, this is what I am. I am walking, I am sitting.” Natural is the belief that there is an entity, that things are I, me, and mine.

The commentary to the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* poses and answers the question of what makes the awareness of a meditator distinct from ordinary awareness. It says that even ordinary animals know when they are moving, but their awareness is clouded by delusion and

conception of self. The awareness that we are trying to cultivate is a very specific type of awareness. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* it describes the meditator's state as possessing *patissatimattāya* which means "with just a state of remembrance", i.e. of the object as it is. The awareness that we are trying to evoke is a one-to-one recognition of each experience just as it is.

Such recognition is not a natural state of human beings; our natural state of observation does not contain this one-to-one remembrance or mindfulness. Even though you may believe that you know walking as walking or sitting as sitting, there is usually much more going on in the mind; our ordinary inclination is to view our experiences as me, as mine, as self. Unless our meditation practice forces us to see reality as the moments of experience that it is, we will inevitably become attached even to our practice, conceiving of it as self or belonging to self.

The fact that noting is unnatural, going against our natural inclination, is the actual reason for its use; its purpose is to change our natural inclination to interpret and extrapolate our experiences in favor of seeing things just as they are. Such a change takes considerable effort; more than newcomers to meditation might realize, because of how set we are in our "natural" ways. Meditation forces us to change our entire outlook, far beyond what we might expect going in.

Not Noting the Phenomenon

Q: *Is cultivating a habit of noting, that does not correspond to a special mindfulness of the phenomenon, a step in the wrong direction?*

A: Yes, it would lead you in the wrong direction. The practice is to note the phenomenon or the experience that is the most prominent in the present moment. Note it for as long as it lasts, like "hearing, hearing" and when that experience ceases, go back to noting the rising and falling of the abdomen.

If you hear a dog bark without seeing it, do you note "dog, dog" or "hearing, hearing?" You cannot experience "dog," but you can experience "hearing," and that is a very important distinction.
"Hearing" is an experience but "dog" is a concept.

Concepts can be valid objects of meditation; you could actually focus on the sound of a dog barking and say “dog, dog,” visualizing a dog in your mind. That is a valid form of meditation, but it will not lead you to an understanding of reality because it is not real; it is a concept that arises in your mind, the concept of a dog. The reality of it is a vision in the mind, a sound at the ear, and the experience of hearing which really does occur. The importance of using the word, like “hearing, hearing, hearing”, is that it pares away the concepts. In the beginning it may not, as the mind may still be caught up in concepts, but eventually the mind lets go of the concepts, because again and again you are saying, “No, it is not a dog; it is just hearing. No, it is not a dog; it is just hearing.” The mind will try to respond “But it is a dog!”... “No, it is just hearing”... “But it is a nice dog”... “No, it is just hearing”... “But I like the sound”... “No, it is just sound.” Eventually the mind will become accustomed to being with the actual experience, and it will concede that, “Oh yes, it is just sound or just hearing.” This is the importance of the correct practice. If you say “dog, dog, dog,” you will never get to that point where you experience reality for what it is

It is very important to know the difference between concepts and reality. People who have never practiced intensive meditation have a hard time understanding this difference. When taught about experiential reality, they become confused, asking “What do you mean this is just a concept? What do you mean this is not reality?” If you have never really spent time experiencing reality objectively without conceiving anything of it, it is hard to tell the difference between reality and conception. For a person who has spent time meditating mindfully, on the other hand, it is hard to understand how you could *not* tell the difference between the two.

This question also relates to the broad subject of why we have a word at all and why we use the noting technique. We use the noting technique because of our understanding of the word *sati,* which is usually translated as mindfulness. The word *sati* literally means “remembering” or “recalling”. *Sati* means remembering one’s present experience for what it is, without reaction or interpretation, or any sort of mental conceiving whatsoever. The Buddha himself explained *sati* as, “When walking, one knows, ‘I am walking.’; when standing, one knows, ‘I am standing.’; when there is a painful feeling, one knows, ‘there is a painful feeling.’.” We use this sort of reminder to keep from forgetting about our experiences and getting lost in the conceptual world of our minds. Reminding ourselves of reality in this way allows us to dwell, as the Buddha said, not clinging to anything, not being dependent on anything, leaving behind our mental constructs, remembering experiences just as they are.

What word one uses to remember one's experiences as they are isn't really all that important, as long as it has these three effects: 1) the effect of bringing the mind closer to the object as it is, 2) keeping it on the object, and 3) preventing proliferation based on the object. If you do not use a word to remind yourself in this way, your mind will be hard-pressed to fully fix on the object. This is why people practice mantra meditation in general, even tranquility based mantras like "Buddho" or "Om" — because the word focuses the mind on the object, whatever that object might be, spiritual or mundane. When you say to yourself "pain, pain," the mind is drawn to the pain; it gravitates towards the pain naturally. For some people, if they feel pain they will say "happy, happy, happy," because they want to feel happy, or they will say "no pain, no pain, no pain," as they want to have no pain. Ask yourself, "what would that do?" Would that bring the mind to see the pain clearly for what it is? No. What it does is create aversion in the mind and a tendency to recoil from the pain. It is this sort of aversive attitude that leads people to take medication or drugs to escape the experience; some people have the idea that meditation is going to be another drug that allows one to get away from pain.

If you use a word that is not related at all, it is just going to create confusion. I doubt the questioner is seriously considering that as a meditation practice — like you feel pain and say "apple, apple, apple," or something. You might use a functional word or phrase like "no pain" to get your mind on to something else. A common secular meditation technique if you are angry is to say to yourself, "100, 99, 98, 97, 96, 95," counting down from 100. Eventually you forget about the anger, so it is a valid means of getting rid of the anger, but it does not teach you about the anger; this is the crucial difference between mindfulness meditation and many other mantra meditation practices. In mindfulness meditation we are using the mantra to bring us closer to the object, as opposed to avoiding the mundane reality.

Noting in the Head

Q: *The instructions say that the mantra should not be at the mouth or in the head. Whenever I note something, it appears in my head as a thought. When I am tired, I am thinking, "tired, tired, tired." Is this important?*

A: When you get better at noting, the thought is with the object. The mantra being at the head is usually a product of being accustomed to conceptual thought. When given this exercise, the

untrained mind's only way of implementing it is to create it as a thought in the head. When I started, I was actually seeing the words like they were pasted onto the inside of my forehead. I was getting headaches due to this. Part of why people think it is in the head is because in the beginning they often get tension in the head from forcing themselves to be with the object, so they confuse that with the actual acknowledgement. They think, "I am acknowledging in my head," but they are not. Their head is just giving rise to tension as a result of the person's tense, forceful, controlling mind state. This is just a matter of a lack of proficiency. Once you become proficient in the practice, the thoughts themselves become natural and a part of the experience. They are just experiencing reality as it is, as though the word is said in the foot or stomach itself. The only time it should be in the head is when you are acknowledging pain, aching, tension, or feelings in the head.

What Exactly is Noting in Meditation?

Q: *What exactly is noting in meditation?*

A: Noting is the straightening of the mind in regard to the object. Noting is reminding yourself of the essence and reality of the experience, as opposed to seeing one's experiences as entities with qualities that make one react with liking, disliking, or interpretation as me, mine, etc. Noting is for the purpose of experiencing reality as it is, by reminding yourself what it is. The word *sati* is translated as mindfulness, but the word *sati* means remembrance, reminding, reminded-ness, recollected-ness, or the ability to recognize something for what it is. Noting is the creation in the mind of a recognition, which is why the word you choose is not so important. The word itself is an act of recognizing the object as close as possible to what it actually is.

Different methods of meditation and can noting cause clinging?

Q: *What is meditation? Is X (insert method here) a valid meditation? Can noting lead to clinging?*

A: Meditation is any kind of mental practice. It generally involves habits, cultivating or working with mental habits in some way. It can be about breaking down habits. For every moment of experience there are many ways you can respond: you can think about the experience, you can react to it, you can try to suppress it, you can try and find a way to avoid it, you can go with it or engage with it, you can encourage it to continue, you can enjoy it, you can ignore it.

Some types of practice are only meditation in the Western sense of the word; mulling over or pondering something. These are not valid forms of meditation in a Buddhist sense. When you feel pain, if you contemplate it intellectually, thinking to yourself, “This is impermanent, this is suffering, this is not self” then you are creating abstract thought about it; you are not actually cultivating mindfulness. Your mind is focused on the thoughts and you are not actually paying attention to the experience.

The difference between abstraction and saying to yourself “pain, pain” or “thinking, thinking” is that repeating the name of the experience puts your attention on the experience itself, evoking a consciousness that is free from any kind of judgment, abstraction, or diversification—free from making more out of the experience than it actually is. Noting is a unique form of interaction, designed to create an objective state of mind where you simply experience the object as it is. Qualities like patience, equanimity, and even peace and tranquility, are all associated with this non-reactive state of awareness. Our purpose is to cultivate a state where we do not create, proliferate or make anything out of the objects of our experience.

In Buddhist theory, *bhava* is the link in the chain that leads to suffering. *Bhava* means making something out of something; for example, if someone insults you and you get upset about it, make something of it, then you have engaged in *bhava*. *Bhava* means literally “being” or “becoming.” Any time you make a big (or small) deal of something you are creating *bhava*. The use of the mantra or noting is special in that it is tautological—it is not saying anything new about the experience; it is just reminding you to experience the object simply for what it is. Noting is unique in that it results in an absence of results, and it should feel like that. It should feel like you have gained a respite, been given a moment that is free from any contemplating, reacting, or diversifying.

On the other hand, the result of noting is not nothing. When you remind yourself of the objective nature of an experience, you create a state of objectivity and, more importantly, you foster a habit of being objective. People who never practice meditation are constantly engaging with experiences based on specific habits of reactivity; liking, disliking, identifying, judging, etc. These reactions are so immediate and so habitual that they seem to be a part of the experience itself. In a similar manner, meditation develops specific habits, but the habits in meditation, especially mindfulness meditation, are much simpler. By saying to ourselves “pain, pain” or

“thinking, thinking”, we evoke states of experiencing things just as they are; by practicing this way regularly, such states become habitual, flowing into our ordinary lives. At work or with family, in situations we would ordinarily be stressed, reactive or reactionary, we will find ourselves far less reactionary because of the habits that we are developing through mindfulness practice. Meditation is not magic and it is not a quick fix, because we are dealing with old habits that are years and perhaps lifetimes old, but the change takes place quite clearly and the evidence is empirically observable. It involves simple principles of cultivating habits and how they affect one’s mind.

Furthermore, becoming habitually objective allows you to see your experiences and reactions more clearly than before. You will see clearly how bad habits are bad: anger, greed, conceit, arrogance, worry, restlessness, distraction and so on. You will also see the experiences you react to more clearly themselves; you will see your thoughts, the rationalization and extrapolation that go on in the mind facilitating our reactions. Most importantly, you will come to see the characteristics of impermanence, suffering and non-self in all aspects of your experience. You will see that the things that you used to cling to or want are not worth wanting because the stability you saw in them, the satisfaction you saw in them and the control that you thought you had over them was all an illusion; something ill-conceived out of ignorance. When you see your experiences as they truly are, you see that they are unpredictable, inconstant and impermanent; unsatisfying and unable to facilitate satisfaction; and uncontrollable, unmanageable, without any substance whatsoever. It is this clarity of vision that allows us to let go and become truly independent in the world.

The question of whether noting could lead to clinging is a common one. When hearing about this practice of saying to yourself “angry, angry” or “liking, liking,” people often ask: “Wouldn't that just make the anger worse? Wouldn't that just make me like or want the thing more?” It is reasonable to ask this. If you actually practice noting, however, you will see that it is not so.

When we experience something pleasant, why do we want it? What is it that makes us angry about experiences we don’t like? Clearly it is a bias or prejudice that leads to each. The purpose of reminding yourself of the nature of the object is to prevent the biased perspective that allows reactions like greed and anger to arise.

When states like greed and anger arise, there is a judgment of the experience as “good”, “bad”, “me”, “mine”, etc. We often reinforce these perceptions with thoughts like “this is good” or “this is bad”. If you are angry at someone you might think to yourself, “I hate that person!” Such a thought makes you more angry because your focus is on the person, not the anger. When you are anxious, you normally perceive the anxiety with more anxiety, perceiving it as a problem you possess rather than merely an experience. When you say to yourself “angry, angry” or “anxious, anxious” it does not escalate because you see it as an experience, rather than a problem or a possession. Noting is basically saying “this is this” rather than saying “this is bad” or “this is good” or “this is mine”, etc.

Noting Thinking

Q: *Some teachers say to note thinking twice and then go back to the rising and falling when our minds wander in meditation. Others say to note thinking until the thought or wandering falls away and then go back to the abdomen. Which is more precise? Also some teachers teach to only note thoughts that take you completely away from the rising and falling, and not note the background thoughts.*

A: First of all, thinking is not something that generally lasts more than a couple of notings. What lasts is the attachment to the thought: whether you like it or dislike it, or if it is interesting for you — that is what is going to keep it coming back and make it seem like the thought is persisting. Thoughts are actually quite fleeting, so if you are just focusing on the thought, noting two or three times is really enough, or sometimes even once, then go back to the rising and falling. If it does keep coming back, then you should try to note the attachment that is causing it to return. You can note “liking, liking”, “disliking, disliking” or whatever the attachment is.

As far as only noting thoughts that take you completely away from the rising and falling, you could do it either way. When you are walking, we tend to give people some leeway. My teacher explained two different approaches you could adopt; you could stop walking at every thought or you could just bring your mind back to the foot and continue going and when you stop at the end of the walking path then you could practice being mindful of the thoughts.

The point is to be present and mindful of our experiences in the present moment. When you are sitting, it is reasonable to suggest noting all thoughts. Thinking is a very important part of who we are and an understanding of the nature of thoughts is very beneficial. Sometimes you catch your thoughts when they are already finished. You find you have been thinking for a while, and at the very end you realize, “Oh, I was thinking for a long time there.” And then you remind yourself, “thinking, thinking.” Sometimes you catch yourself in the middle of a thought, so in the middle of the thought you say, “thinking, thinking.” With practice, you might catch a thought at the very beginning, when it first arises. The practice of catching thoughts sooner and sooner is an important part of the training; the ability to catch a thought when it first arises shows a clear and mindful state of awareness.

Of course, this is usually something you can train only in intensive meditation courses. Outside of intensive practice, you might think so much that it is better to note “distracted, distracted” and then bring your attention back to the rising and falling, not worrying too much about the individual thoughts. The important thing is to also note attachments to thoughts, just as with everything else. Often, problems we have with noting are not so much caused by the object itself but with our reactions to it: our likes and dislikes, etc. Such reactions are called hindrances; it is worth learning more about the five hindrances: liking, disliking, drowsiness, distraction, and doubt, as they really do get in the way of our progress.

Giving Up Noting

Q: *In the tradition I have been practicing, Bhante Gunaratana has told me not to note mental phenomena such as thinking, itching, etc, because it is likely you will become fixated on the words and fixated on the mental noting but I have noticed you teach this practice. Would you eventually have people deviate from this practice to examine the mental phenomena and the sensation without notation?*

A: No. People often ask if there will be a point when I tell them to stop noting, and the answer is no, there is no such point. There are so many different opinions about noting meditation. Some people say, “noting is *samatha* meditation; not noting is *vipassanā*”. Others I have heard say, “not noting is *samatha*; noting is *vipassanā*.” I have heard people say, “noting inhibits or prevents you from developing concentration.” I have heard people say, “noting gives you too much

concentration." Everyone has an opinion about it, and it is quite funny to listen to all these opinions. The Buddha's teaching is *ehipassiko* which means it lets you "come and see" for yourself; if it does cause you to fixate on the words then you have come and seen, and you should go and see another teacher instead. I have never seen that for myself or with my students.

If you are fixating on the words, then you are not practicing meditation and you should acknowledge the fixating. If you are investigating, say "investigating." In situations where you think you are fixating or you feel you are fixating, it is more important to look at the feeling and the judgment of the practice; that is almost always the problem. It may be that your practice is fine but then doubt arises because we are generally prone to doubt things. When the doubt comes up, acknowledge the doubting and you will see that, just like everything else, it disappears. How can you fixate on the words if you are watching the doubting and you are saying to yourself "doubting, doubting"? After noting you will notice that the doubting has ceased. Isn't that impermanence what we are trying to see? If all you can see is words, you have a problem with your understanding of the practice.

I remember when I first started, all I saw were words in my head. As a very visual person, if I noted "seeing, seeing", there would be those words in my head. My initial practice was crazy practice. I heard them talking about the middle way and so I tried to envision this line down the middle of my body and I was trying to open this up. I saw this white line and I was like trying to get into the middle way somehow. The teacher at the time said practice is like a hammer, and then I got this big headache and so I started to visualize my brain and I was imagining hitting it with a hammer trying to break it open. Everything this teacher said to me I was just visualizing it. It was pretty terrible, but it had nothing to do with the noting practice, and everything to do with my understanding, or lack thereof. Once I started appreciating the noting as simply a reminder meant to prevent reactions, I was able to separate the craziness of my mind from the practice that was leading me to tame it.

If it were the case that noting made you fixated on the words themselves, then mantra meditation in general would be useless, and the word mantra would never have come into popular usage. In reality, however, a mantra *does* have power and *does* focus your mind on an object, whatever the object might be. If noting caused you to fixate on the words, then the Visuddhimagga would be wrong when it describes again and again the use of these words.

According to the Visuddhimagga, when you practice the earth *kasiṇa*, you focus on a disc of earth and repeat one of the various names of earth like *paṭhavī* or *bhūmi*, repeating it a hundred times or a thousand times. The Visuddhimagga is absolutely clear about the use of a mantra. When you practice the white *kasiṇa*, you repeat to yourself, "white, white, white..." When you practice *metta* meditation you repeat a mantra of kindness. When you practice the thirty two constituent parts, you say the name of each part of the body in order, or you pick one, like focusing on the hair, and saying "hair, hair…". This is accepted meditation practice since ancient times and with good reason because mantras have great power and benefit to the mind.

When the Buddha said *gacchanto vā 'gacchāmī'ti pajānāti*, which means "when going, one knows 'I am going'", it is not "one knows the going"; one knows fully and completely "I am going," so there arises a clear thought about the experience. This is not something new. The Buddha taught such practice, and the Visuddhimagga describes explicitly that this is what is meant by meditating. Meditation means to focus one's attention on the object just as it is without diversity of thought; to see white as white, to see blue as blue, to see the earth as earth, and so on; the mantra is the tool used to see things this way.

Proper Noting Procedure

Q: *Can you cover proper noting during meditation? Do you always come back to the breath?*

A: If you are asking about the tradition that we follow, we are not technically practicing mindfulness of the breath. *Ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of the in-breaths and the out-breaths, is technically *samatha* meditation. *Vipassanā* cannot arise when focused on the breath because breath is not an ultimate reality. The ultimate reality is the sensations that lead to the concept of breath, whether at the nose or the stomach. At the nose, there will be sensations of heat and cold; at the stomach there will be sensations of tension and release.

You don't have to focus on sensations related to the breath at all; you can focus on the bodily sensations related to sitting, saying to yourself, "sitting, sitting", or when walking, "walking, walking". When practicing walking meditation you would not focus on the breath; you would focus on the movements of the feet. There is even prostration meditation where you focus on the movements of the hands, the bending of the back, and so on. When eating, you can practice eating meditation, being mindful of "chewing, chewing" and "swallowing."

The easiest object to be mindful of, the most coarse and most obvious, is the body. The mind is more difficult to observe because it is much quicker than the body. The mind is likened to a wild animal; when a hunter wishes to catch a wild animal, they don't run around the jungle chasing after it, they wait quietly by the water, knowing that the wild animal will come to them. The body is like the water, the place where the mind comes and can be caught.

In the Visuddhimagga, Venerable Buddhaghosa says that as the body becomes clearly understood the mind becomes clearly understood along with it. By focusing on the body, you are indirectly learning about the mind, which should make perfect sense because the mind is what is doing the focusing. As you observe the stomach, for instance the rising and falling, you learn all sorts of things about the mind. You will see liking and disliking, boredom and aversion, controlling and stressing. The whole of the practice really is using the body in order to see the mind and when you see the mind, whether it be feelings, thoughts or emotions, you focus on those and when they are gone you come back again to the body because it is still there.

Walking Meditation Q&A

Why Does Walking Meditation Come First?

Q: *Why does walking meditation come before sitting? Is it okay to reverse the order, if that feels more convenient? It seems to me it is harder to concentrate during walking and I become distracted much more easily because there is one more sense included. I have tried walking with closed eyes, but it does not work as I lose my balance.*

A: First, do not walk with closed eyes as you will lose your balance. Beyond that, this question concerns the goal of meditation. You describe your goal as concentration, and that is wrong, the goal should not be concentration, it should be wisdom. This is something that has to be repeated again and again: hoping for concentration or calm in meditation is a real hindrance. It is an attachment and a desire, wanting your experience to be other than what it is.

There is nothing wrong with your walking meditation. What you are seeing is the impermanence, suffering, and non-self of the mind. The mind is changing all the time, so there is impermanence; one moment you are with the foot and then all of a sudden your mind is off

somewhere else and it seems like the two mind states had no relationship with each other. This results in suffering; it is not the way you want it to be according to your desire. Because you can't control it, you start to realize that it is non-self. You cannot make it be the way you want it to be. You might make a resolve, "Now I am going to be mindful from here to the wall," and two steps later you have forgotten, because even your mind is not you or yours.

Distraction has to fade away naturally. You should not try to suppress it or force it away as this gives rise to more delusion, the idea that "I can control the mind." Proper focus has to come naturally through mindfulness. Meditators are often overly concerned with concentration, thinking that their minds must be calm and quiet in order to give rise to wisdom. This is sometimes due to common translations of the word *samādhi*' as concentration. The word *samādhi* is best translated as focus, because it comes from the same root as the word 'same', meaning 'level' or 'balanced'. The goal is not merely to become concentrated; it is to balance concentration with effort.

Practicing walking and sitting together balances concentration with effort. Sitting meditation is a great practice but until your faculties are balanced it can make you drowsy. If that happens, you should stand up and practice walking instead. Walking meditation is great for developing energy, but it can have the problem of making you distracted. When you feel distracted, you might decide to sit down and do sitting meditation instead. What you are seeing is that in order to balance the faculties, both walking and sitting are important. In sitting you can become drowsy or, caught up in the calm and the tranquility, you may fall into a trance. Getting up and walking can help you to break such habits; it can also help you to overcome attachment to pleasant states attained during sitting meditation, forcing you to be objective. We like sitting and we like lying even better, normally because we can enter into very peaceful states lying down, including falling asleep which many people are very much attached to.

Why do we do walking first? Doing walking meditation first is not a hard and fast rule but one of the benefits of walking meditation, enumerated by the Buddha himself, is that the focus of mind gained from walking lasts for a long time. Because it is dynamic it has the ability to prepare the mind for sitting meditation. It is a useful segue from the dynamic behavior during ordinary life into a static sitting posture: if you go directly from working and acting in the world to sitting still, your mind hasn't had a chance to prepare. This is why people find themselves nodding off during sitting meditation or falling into trance states. Walking meditation is halfway

between the two. The long lasting focus and balance of mind that comes from walking meditation augments sitting meditation.

When you are living an ordinary life, sometimes you want to give up walking meditation entirely because you are walking all day or you are active all day, and it can be that you might just do the sitting meditation. You do not have to maintain walking and sitting in equal parts as a hard and fast rule, especially when your life involves physical exertion. The Buddha's advice regarding walking and sitting was mostly in regards to intensive meditation practice wherein one lies down to sleep for only four hours each day and splits the remaining 20 hours walking, sitting, walking, and sitting with minimal chores of eating and attending to one's bodily needs.

Note Every Phenomenon?

Q: *Is it necessary to note every phenomenon that occurs during walking meditation?*

A: No. Given the dynamic nature of walking meditation, it can actually be a hindrance to try to note everything while in motion. A general rule of thumb is to ignore small disturbances like fleeting thoughts, sounds, or sensations. Simply bring the mind back to focus on the foot, without interrupting the movements of the body. If the disturbance is significant enough to keep the mind away from the foot, then stop, bring the feet together (noting "stopping, stopping"), and note the phenomenon in the standing position until it either goes away or the mind loses interest, and then resume the walking as normal.

Eyes Open or Closed?

Q: *Should the eyes be open or closed during walking meditation?*

A: The eyes should be open during walking meditation to maintain balance. The mind should be with the feet, not the eyes.

Is walking meditation necessary?

Q: *Is walking meditation necessary?*

A: No. There is no specific posture that is necessary in meditation. Walking meditation is a means of keeping the body in shape, as well as cultivating effort to balance excessive concentration that can lead to drowsiness. If one is unable to practice walking meditation properly due to injuries, sickness, or disability, it is recommended to use a cane or stationary object such as a wall, railing, or table to balance oneself, noting the movements of the stabilizing hand. If one is unable to practice walking meditation at all, one can improvise by performing other bodily movements, like moving one's legs, wheeling a wheelchair, etc., for the purpose of keeping the body healthy and cultivating effort while still maintaining mindfulness.

Sitting meditation Q&A

Sitting Still

Q: *Is there a way to get more motivated while meditating? Sometimes I want to meditate for an hour, but I end up unable to meditate for longer than 20 minutes.*

A: I think an important part of the answer is that meditation is something that is momentary; it is something that is to be done at every moment. You cannot meditate for an hour; you can only meditate for one instant, and that instant is either meditative or it is not. At this moment, are you mindful or are you not? When you ask how to get motivated during meditation, a good question to ask yourself might be, “How do I best make use of this hour, so that it is generally meditative?” If you approach the problem this way, you will not worry so much about how long you sit or become discouraged by your inability to sit in meditation for a long time.

Our inability to sit for long periods is a part of the reason why we meditate in the first place. The mental qualities preventing you from sitting from long periods should be a main focus of your practice. This is something easy to forget, because they are the same problems present throughout our life and we are quick to react to them rather than understand them.

The problems in our minds are a part of who we are, so we meditate in order to overcome them rather than avoid them. One trick you can use when you want to stop meditating is to ask yourself, “What is the problem? What is it that is causing me to want to stop sitting here, to get up and do something else? What is the difference between sitting here and going somewhere else?” There could be a good reason, like you have some important work to do, or you are going to injure yourself if you sit in this position any longer, but most likely it is simply because of the reasons why we are meditating in the first place; desire, aversion, delusion, etc. These problematic mind states come up in meditation and present a chance to work them out. Meditation gives us a chance to examine our minds and to see what is causing us stress and suffering; what is of benefit and what is not. Understanding this can help improve motivation as well.

Other ways of creating motivation include positive reminders of the benefits of meditation-the benefits to yourself, the peace and clarity of mind that comes from meditation, and how much you can help other people as well. You can think of friends and family who are stressed and suffering that you would be able to help by learning this incredible technique of stress reduction. Conversely, you could motivate yourself using negative reminders of what happens if we do not meditate: the unwholesome mind states that consume our mind, the hurt we cause towards ourselves, the stress, the addiction and the suffering that we bring to the world around us. You can remind yourself of the dangers that come from allowing these states to persist over the long term; the danger of not being able to cope with misfortune, sickness and old age. When you are not able to deal with simple pains and stresses from sitting still for more than 20 minutes, what happens if you become invalid and have to stay in bed for days? How will you be able to cope with that? This sort of reminder can help us appreciate the benefits of meditation.

Why Do We Focus on the Abdomen?

Q: *Why do we focus on the abdomen?*

A: The abdomen is a physical phenomenon; it is the element of motion (*vayo dhatu*) as described in Buddhist texts. Mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*) is technically considered tranquility (*samatha*) meditation while analysis of the elements (*catudhātuvavatthāna*) is considered the basis of insight meditation. While the elements are experienced directly, the breath itself is a concept. Although watching the abdomen can be thought of as mindfulness of breathing, it differs from watching in and out breathing in one important way: the latter often leads to tranquility rather than directly to seeing the nature of reality, while the former is set firmly in ultimate reality and thus conducive to seeing it clearly for what it is.

Mind Returning to Nose or Upper Lip

Q: *What do you do if the mind continuously returns to a more familiar object of meditation (e.g. the tip of the nose or upper lip)?*

A: Noting sensations caused by the breath at any part of the body is not wrong; wisdom can be cultivated based on any real experience. The abdomen is favored due to its gross nature, as opposed to the sensations that occur around the mouth which are more subtle and therefore favor tranquility meditation. As our tradition has developed specific techniques based on starting with the abdomen as a base, we ask meditators coming to our center to use it as their primary object. If meditators are accustomed to using another object of meditation, they should note experiences that arise based on past habit when the mind returns to the other object. For example, “hot”, “cold”, “feeling”, or simply “knowing” that the mind has returned to the nose or mouth. Note the experience until the mind becomes disinterested, whereupon one should return to the abdomen and continue noting as usual.

Why Return to the Abdomen

Q: *Why should one return to the abdomen rather than moving from one object to another as they arise?*

A: It is not intrinsically wrong to note one object after another randomly. In practice, however, this tends to lead to a sense of anticipation. Waiting for the next object to arise is detrimental to objective awareness. The meditator is therefore instructed to note one object until it disappears, then return to the abdomen until another object takes one’s attention. As the movements of the abdomen are reliably present, they provide a good base to observe the present reality at all times.

Unable to Perceive the Rising and Falling Motion

Q: *What if one is unable to perceive the rising and falling motion of the abdomen?*

A: It is common for new meditators, especially those who are exceptionally tense in body and mind to have difficulty breathing naturally. Meditators should rest assured that with practice, the body and mind will relax sufficiently to allow ordinary observation of the movements of the abdomen. It may help to place a hand on the abdomen during meditation to familiarize oneself with the movements. If this does not work, one can practice meditation in the lying position,

where the movements should be clearly discernible. If the movements of the abdomen are temporarily indiscernible, one may note “sitting, sitting” instead.

Nothing to Note?

Q: *What should one do when there is nothing to note?*

A: It is common to encounter states of quiet where there is no awareness of the abdomen or any other experience besides a sense of calm, quiet, or emptiness. Although these states may seem to be outside of ordinary meditation practice, they are no different from any other phenomenon and should therefore be noted in the same way, noting “quiet, quiet”, “calm, calm”, or “empty, empty” until they disappear. If there is any liking or wanting in regard to such states, one should note that as “liking, liking” or “wanting, wanting”.

Reflecting During Meditation

Q: *Sometimes I am facing an issue, and I cheat a little by using my meditation time to reflect on it. I try to break it down to clearly understand it and understand why it is affecting me negatively or positively. Is this a valid meditation? If I just repeat “disliking, disliking” the issue keeps arising, and it seems like my mind is screaming for an interpretation compared to a passive observation.*

A: ‘Valid meditation’ does not mean anything as meditation could mean anything. Meditation is such a vague word. Do you mean Decartes' meditation? There are many different kinds of activity called meditation. Meditating and reflecting on your problems is very different from what we teach and practice. If you want an answer like “what is such a meditation likely to lead to?”, as it is not particularly based on mindfulness, I would say that you are more likely to be plagued by judgments and reactions when you reflect upon a thought. It can be a useful practice at times, but it cannot replace mindfulness.

You can understand this when we talk about the second part of your question. You say that when you just repeat the mantra your mind is screaming for an interpretation. This is what we expect to see; this is not a sign that your practice is going wrong. This is a sign that reality is not under your control. When you note, “disliking, disliking” and the issue keeps arising, what you are seeing is that it is not under your control, that you are not in charge, and that it does not turn

off just because you want it to go away. This is what we are trying to see; if the issue keeps coming back again and again, and you keep staying objective or, as you say, passively observing it, eventually you will be fed up with it, saying, “look, this is just making me suffer again and again and again.”

It is necessary for our issues to come up again and again. We are not trying to get rid of problems, we are trying to understand them as experiences. When you understand your experiences clearly enough, your mind will cease to react in the ways you ordinarily react because you will see they just cause you suffering again and again. The unfortunate truth is that to free yourself from something you really have to go through it, experiencing it again and again. There is no quick fix. When you talk about a more proactive practice of trying to find out what is wrong, it just encourages a habit of trying to fix things. That habit is problematic: with it, you will never become disenchanted, turn away or let go because you will always be trying to make things better.

Meditation Progress

The Four *Iddhipādas* (How to Succeed)

Q: *How can I succeed in life and in meditation?*

A: People living in the world have many questions on solving problems in worldly life. They want to know how to succeed when confronted with the challenges of relationships, livelihood, and of course personal well-being. The Buddha’s teaching on success is applicable to all challenges we face, both worldly and religious. The Buddha taught four *Iddhipāda*; roads to power and mastery. They are the four means by which to succeed in any endeavor, meditation included. If you can understand and keep these four principles in mind, your meditation and your life in general will succeed.

1. The first *iddhipāda* is ***chanda*** - interest**.** A person needs to be interested in what they are doing, wanting to do it, being inclined towards it. It is hard to succeed at something if it is not something you are inclined to do, something you like doing. If you dislike a job, this of course works against your success. If you do not like to meditate, it is not easy to gain the benefits of meditation.

Some people criticize mindfulness meditation because it is not comfortable. They talk about more comfortable types of meditation as being better. I do not think anyone would disagree that it is much better to have a pleasant meditation. It would be much better if we did not have to struggle. The problem with comfortable and pleasant meditations is that they do not generally challenge you or bring you out of your comfort zone. As a result they do not generally lead to enlightenment. But how do you practice something that challenges you, something that forces you to change, without hating it? I think only mindfulness meditation has the power to allow you to do this. I think with anything else you just have to change what you are doing; make it comfortable, make it enjoyable, or stop doing it. Mindfulness is quite different because dislike of anything, including meditation, can be an object of mindfulness.

Disliking is independent of the actual disliked thing. If you dislike meditating, it is not directly caused by the meditation. Your reaction and judgment is independent of the things you judge and react to. This is part of what we learn in meditation. Meditation itself is not exempt from our reactions and is not exempt from our study of our reactions. If you do not like meditating, it is still a disliking just like any other disliking, and you can be mindful of that. How to overcome the dislike of meditation is not to force yourself to meditate even though you do not want to meditate. The answer is to meditate on the disliking. When the disliking becomes the object, it is no longer a problem.

2. The second *iddhipāda* is ***viriya*** - effort. With any work you do, if you do not put in effort, you do not succeed. But with meditation, it is a bit different. If you just try to meditate harder, you will not really benefit like you might in other kinds of activity. Right effort is a momentary thing; it is in the moment that you actually do it. You either have it or you do not. Are you mindful of the object or are you not? If you are mindful, there is effort there as well. You have made the choice to be mindful, and that choice takes effort. It is not the effort to walk or sit longer. If you do a lot of meditation whether it is sitting or walking and it becomes tiresome, then the fatigue has to be the object of your meditation. If you are truly mindful, fatigue does not bother you.

Practically speaking, right effort means just do it. When you choose to walk even when you may feel tired, or sit even when you feel tired, this is right effort. Be mindful of the fatigue rather than letting the fatigue control your practice. When you get home from work sometimes and feel like you are too tired to meditate, make a decision to be mindful and focus on the fatigue as the object rather than letting it control you. This takes effort. If you do not do it, it does not get done. With any work this is applicable. As in any work, if you do not put out effort there is no hope of success.

3. The third *iddhipāda* is ***citta*** - focus. *Citta* means keeping your mind on your work. In order to succeed, you need to pay attention, focus on what you are doing. If you are not focused on your work, not paying attention, you will do a sloppy and poor job. This is even more true in meditation. If you are not paying attention in meditation, your mind distracted by abstract, conceptual ideas, there is no way your meditation can progress. If you are not paying attention to the present, real experiences that present themselves at every moment, there is no way to succeed in mindfulness meditation. Attention is a sign of mindfulness. If you are mindful, you are paying attention. Mindfulness grasps the object and confronts it, which goes hand in hand with paying attention. Whatever you are going to do in life, if you want to succeed at it, you have to be there and be present; this is one of the great benefits of mindfulness meditation, that it improves your attention span as a part of the training.

4. The fourth *iddhipāda* is ***vīmaṃsā*** - consideration. *Vīmaṃsā* is not like *citta*, which refers to the focus on the task at hand. When you focus on something without reflection or consideration, it is easy to become oblivious to the imperfections of your work. This may even reinforce bad habits. Someone might practice walking and sitting meditation for many hours without great benefit as they have failed to recognize their lack of mindfulness, due to lack of reflection about their mental activity. A part of the benefit of interviews with a teacher during a meditation course is that the meditator is forced to reflect on their practice, when the teacher asks how their practice was that day. Without such questioning, it is easy to reinforce bad habits and get stuck in unmindful mental activity. *Vīmaṃsā* is what allows a meditator to correct their practice.

   The same goes with any work you might undertake in life. You cannot just work like an

ox. You have to be clever. You have to be able to reflect and consider that your methods might be wrong, that maybe you need to change something. *Vīmaṃsā* involves the ability to adapt and adjust. You can see this in the case where a worker performs the same job every day, without ever thinking that maybe they could improve if they did something different. And quite often if anyone suggests that they could improve by changing their methods, they become upset, thinking that it works fine the way they do it. This sort of inability to change and adapt based on considered reflection will inevitably hinder your ability to succeed. Flexibility and adaptability are important both in the world and in meditation; they are signs of someone who is mindful, adaptable, not attached, and not stuck up or egotistical. When confronted with the need to change, they do not get upset. They change and they adapt. *Vīmaṃsā* is the ability to consider and adjust rather than just plough on ignorantly like an ox.

Imperfections of Insight

The following is condensed from Chapter 4, *Imperfections of Insight*, from "How to Meditate II" by Ven. Yuttadhammo Bhikkhu.

When the meditator sees the causal relationship between the body and the mind, the meditator begins to naturally resist some habitual tendencies and realizes that certain built-up habits are a cause of great suffering to oneself and others. The meditator also realizes that it is the reactivity to desires and aversions that is a real cause for stress and suffering. It is this sort of realization that leads to the next stage of knowledge, which is based on a deepening understanding that the objects of experience are unworthy of the obsession we normally give to them. Before this understanding comes to fruition however, it is common for the mind to rebel, recoiling from the sudden onslaught of instability, insipidness, and chaos that arises from no longer chasing after pleasantness nor running away from unpleasantness. In the beginning, the experience of reality is more likely to lead one to seek out an alternative to that which is impermanent, stressful, and uncontrollable. As a result, a new meditator will tend to cling to anything that appears at first glance even remotely stable, satisfying, or controllable. Such objects of clinging are called the 'imperfections of insight', of which ten are enumerated in the texts.

1. ***obhāsa* (Illumination):** experience of visions or bright lights, to be be noted as “seeing, seeing” until they disappear or are no longer an object of interest for the mind
2. ***ñāṇa* (Knowledge):** mental activity directed toward solving mundane problems in one’s life, to be noted as “thinking, thinking or knowing, knowing”.
3. ***pīti* (Rapture):** experience of ectatic states (floating, flowing energy, uncontrollable laughing or crying) which should be noted objectively.
4. ***passaddhi* (Tranquility):** experience of tranquility, calmness or quietude, to be noted as “quiet, quiet…” or “calm, calm”.
5. ***sukha* (Happiness):** experience of pleasant feelings, to be noted as “happy, happy”.
6. ***adhimokkha* (Resolve):** experience of confidence, self-assurance, or thinking oneself has obtained a supramundane state of being. These various states should be noted, reminding oneself of their various natures.
7. ***paggaha* (Exertion):** experience of becoming hyper-energetic or feeling as if one could practice all day and night without stopping. One should note energy when it becomes apparent.
8. ***upaṭṭhāna* (Attention)**: state of attentiveness brought about by the constant practice of mindfulness that becomes an obstacle when one takes up an object of observation, something that is outside the present moment. All of these activities should be seen as distractions from the path and noted.
9. ***upekkhā* (Equanimity):** experience of equanimity can also lead to delusions of enlightenment as one reflects that one is no longer plagued by likes or dislikes. Such thoughts should be noted as they arise, and one should remind oneself “calm, calm”.
10. ***nikanti* (Desire):** experience of desire arising for other items on this list, or for sense pleasure, or for insight itself, to be recognized as harmful obstacles to true understanding of reality and noted accordingly.

Meditators should take note of the many ways in which one can become distracted from the path, enticed into a false conception of stability, satisfaction, and control by the many pleasant and even positive by-products of the meditation practice. Meditators must stand ready to observe such experiences with a clear mind, reminding themselves of the true essence of these experiences using simple mantras that capture their nature, clearly and succinctly. Once

they are able to do this, they will be ready to enter the realm of true and profound insight into the nature of reality.

Meditation Progress Q&A

Progress in the Practice?

Q: How does one know if one is progressing in the practice?

A: Progress is a tricky thing; in a sense, the whole idea of progress is misleading. Where are you trying to progress to? What are you trying to achieve? Progress in meditation is about giving up and letting go, not becoming or obtaining something new. Any concern that you are not getting anything out of meditation should be noted objectively and discarded.

Q: How should my meditation progress after the initial stages of concentration of the breath and being witness to a clear thought....and when will I know I have arrived?

A: Meditation is a long and gradual path. Gradually, we see that there is nothing that we could hold on to, cling to, or try to shape and mold into the perfect reality that would make us happy, and so we let go. The clear thought of mindfulness practice helps you to let go and be here and now without wanting to be somewhere else or something else than what you are. When you create a clear thought, you will see clearly. If you practice correctly, you will see and learn things about yourself that you did not know before. You will come to see things about yourself that you could not see before, which will help you to deal with all of the challenges in life in a more rational, wise and productive way.

In meditation practice you will encounter many hindrances. Some hindrances will make you think that you have hit a roadblock; states of liking, disliking, boredom, worry, depression, etc. Your mind will change constantly as you practice and not every change will be positive. The mind is always changing; you might think that when you practice you are just going to get happier and happier, but mindfulness forces you to face both the positive and the negative inside of yourself. All sorts of negative mind states can arise during the meditation practice and you should work to catch them and to apply mindfulness to each one as it arises. Progress in the path is working through these negative states until they are no longer triggered in the ways

they used to be triggered. The best answer for when you have arrived at the goal is that you have no more potential for greed, anger, or delusion to arise; when you just see things as they are, when you are content regardless of how things are, and when nothing has the potential to trigger stress or suffering in your mind, that is when you've reached the goal.

Every time you sit down you should learn something new about reality. If you are practicing and never learning anything, no matter how small, then I would say that maybe you are doing something wrong. There are four things that we intend to learn from the practice.

The first thing that you should learn from the practice is the nature of experiential reality both inside and in the world around you. You come to learn that reality is made up of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling and thinking; and that these in turn are composed of physical and mental moments of experience.

The second thing that you learn is impermanence, suffering and non-self. You will see that the things you cling to are not worth clinging to; they are impermanent, unsatisfying and uncontrollable, leading you to weaken your grasp on the things you experience.

Finally, your learning will culminate in realization of the four noble truths, specifically the noble path and the noble fruit. The path is the eradication of certain defilements on reaching the path of Sotāpanna, Sakadāgāmi, Anāgāmi, and Arahant. The fruition is the experience of freedom from suffering caused by those defilements.

Once you realize the third and fourth knowledges, questions about progress do not have the same weight because you already know what the goal is; your only work from then on is to attain these knowledges again and again, weakening your defilements more and more. Until realizing these supermundane knowledges, you should look to understand your experiences, seeing them as body and mind, that they are not worth clinging to, and how clinging leads to suffering; seeing these things is a sign of progress in the practice.

Stages of Insight

Q: *Can you explain what an insight is in regard to meditation? Is it a thought that arises that causes you to let go or does it occur at a deeper level? Also, when a person reaches the Sotapanna state of mind, is that a distinct event in time?*

A: What is an insight? There are two kinds of insight.

The first kind of insight is at the intellectual level, where one has an epiphany or intellectual realization.

The second kind of insight is a meditative experience of reality for what it is, a realization based on meditation practice. It is an experience, not an intellectual thought; there is no need for thought because one sees things as they are. There are sixteen stages of insight that one realizes in the practice of mindfulness meditation. If one practices intensively for long enough, it can be expected to go through all sixteen of these in order.

1. The first stage is called ***Nāmarupa Pariccheda Ñāṇa***, insight into the separation between body and mind. At this stage, a meditator sees that their being is separated into two parts, one being physical and the other being mental. One sees that there is no self or soul, only these two realities of the physical and mental phenomena that arise and cease every moment.
2. The second stage, ***Paccaya Pariggaha Ñāṇa***, is seeing the nature of the physical and mental phenomena and how they work together based on cause and effect.
3. The third stage is called ***Sammasana Ñāṇa***. This is translated as “knowledge of comprehension”. It is where one begins to see the three characteristics inherent in every arisen phenomenon: impermanence, suffering and non-self; why nothing in the world is worth clinging to. The things that we thought were permanent are impermanent. The things that we thought were satisfying cannot satisfy us because they are impermanent. Further, they are not under our control and we cannot force reality to be this way or the way we wish it to be.
4. The fourth stage is ***Udayabbaya Ñāṇa***, knowledge of arising and ceasing. At this stage one is able to clearly break reality down into moments of experience that arise and cease. Rather than seeing things as good or bad, one simply sees them as arising and ceasing incessantly.
5. The fifth stage is ***Bhanga Ñāṇa***, the knowledge of cessation; realizing that everything that arises must cease. Focussing on cessation impresses upon the meditator the reality of impermanence.

6. The sixth stage is ***Bhaya Ñāṇa***, knowledge of danger or fearsomeness. At this stage, one begins to realize that there is a problem with clinging to impermanence.
7. The seventh stage is ***Ādīnava Ñāṇa***, knowledge of the disadvantages of clinging. This is a direct result of experiencing the problem in the previous stage; here one comes to the conclusion that clinging is to blame for our precarious situation.
8. The eighth stage is ***Nibbidā Ñāṇa***, knowledge of disenchantment. At this stage one becomes disenchanted with reality, turning away from clinging to experiences, realizing that there is nothing in the world which is really unique, exceptional, or special in any way. One begins to see that in the end it is all just seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling or thinking. One begins to turn away from arisen phenomena, realizing that happiness does not lie in anything that arises.
9. The ninth stage is ***Muñcitukamyatā Ñāṇa***, knowledge of desire for release or freedom. At this stage, the meditator begins to actively move away from arisen experience, no longer looking into external objects for peace and happiness.
10. The tenth stage is ***Paṭisaṅkhā Ñāṇa***, involves honest, objective introspection based on the earlier realizations that free the meditator from active bias. '*Paṭisaṅkhā*' means going over everything again, this time with an unbiased perspective, trying to see where exactly you are clinging rather than where you can find happiness.
11. The tenth stage is ***Saṅkhārupekkhā Ñāṇa***, knowledge of equanimity. As your perception changes, instead of trying to find happiness in experiences, your mind begins to feel equanimous in regard to all arisen phenomena; the mind in this state is finely tuned and alert, interacting with experience without reacting to it. This is the pinnacle of mundane insight.
12. After *Saṅkhārupekkhā Ñāṇa*, there arises several knowledges in succession. The next one is ***Anuloma Ñāṇa*** where the mind reaches its finest point; it is the consummation of insight where the mind is so finely tuned that you are able to see things exactly as they are. This is the moment of clarity that we are aiming for. *Anuloma Ñāṇa* means a mind that "goes with the grain" of truth as opposed to going against the grain. It means being finally in tune with the way things are. This knowledge is just a brief moment in time.

13. The next knowledge is called ***Gotrabhū Ñāṇa***, wherein one changes one's lineage. Change of lineage means changing one's state of mind from being an ordinary human being to being one who has realized the ultimate truth. This stage marks the division between the last moment of *Anuloma Ñāṇa* and the moment after.
14. The next moment is called ***Magga Ñāṇa***, attainment of the path, where one's mind goes inward, rather than following a path outward. *Magga Ñāṇa* is the path inward, the first moment of freedom from suffering.
15. The moments that follow are called ***Phala Ñāṇa***, realization of the fruit of the path. They have the same nature as the first moment, but are called fruit, because the first moment has already brought about freedom.
16. The final stage is called ***Paccavekkhana Ñāṇa***, wherein one reflects upon the previous stages. After emerging from the realization of Nibbāna, one reflects on the results, seeing what has changed in the mind as a result of that realizing.

Sotāpanna is attained at the moment of realizing the 14th stage of insight, *Magga Ñāṇa*, for the first time. Once one attains that stage, one is said to be the "first type" of enlightened. The name for this is *sotāpatti-magga*, realization of the path of *Sotāpanna*. The next moment, with the attainment of'*Phala Ñāṇa*, one becomes the second type of holy person, called *sotāpatti-phala* or fruition of *Sotāpanna*. From that moment on, one is considered to be a *Sotāpanna*, one who has entered the stream. The meaning is that these realizations have fundamentally changed the person's outlook on reality; there is no going back to an ordinary state of being for that person. They are considered to have "entered the stream" to freedom from suffering and will be born a maximum of seven more lifetimes in samsara.

How can I cultivate effort?

Q: *Which way can I cultivate effort? It is hard for me to meditate. How do I make it easier?*

A: Meditation is hard. Dissatisfaction with quality or amount of practice is a recognition of imperfection; you just have to work on becoming more perfect. It may take years or lifetimes to become a perfect meditator; there is no quick fix and no pill that one can take that suddenly gives one the qualities necessary to make it feel effortless. Effort is something one has to work at. Asking for ways to make it easier is probably not the best way to cultivate effort; look at it as a chance to find ways to become stronger rather than the experience easier. Associating with

good people can help; the Buddha recommended us to associate with good people, as when one associates with good people good qualities increase.

Difficulties in Meditation

Wrong Mindfulness

The Buddha taught that mindfulness is always good. In the Abhidhamma, it is called a *sobhanacetasikā*, which means a beautiful mindstate. The Buddha himself did, however, use the term “wrong mindfulness” at times. To answer the question of what wrong mindfulness might mean, we begin with a technical definition of mindfulness.

In the traditional Theravada texts all Dhammas have four qualities: characteristic, function, manifestation, and proximate cause.

The characteristic of mindfulness is not wobbling. The ordinary mind wobbles and wavers; it is not stable nor fixed on an object. Mindfulness enables grasping the object firmly without wavering.

The function of mindfulness is to not forget. Ordinary mindfulness refers to the ability to recollect things that happened long ago. The meaning of the *satipaṭṭhāna*, mindfulness meditation practice, is to not forget the object in the present moment. Ordinarily, we experience something momentarily and then get caught up in judgment and reaction, forgetting about the actual object. We see something, but we are not interested in the seeing; we are interested in what it means. Is it good? Is it bad? Is it me? Is it mine? Mindfulness does not do that; mindfulness sticks with the pure experience of the object.

Mindfulness manifests in two ways: 1) as guarding or 2) as confronting the objective field. An ordinary mind is unguarded, and defilements may easily enter. Mindfulness guards against these defilements. Mindfulness also confronts the objective field. An ordinary mind is not always able to confront objects of experience; when an unpleasant experience comes, the ordinary mind shies away from it. When a pleasant experience arises, the mind immediately chases after it. Guarding the mind and confronting the object are signs of mindfulness, which enables positive and negative experiences without reacting.

The proximate cause that gives rise to mindfulness is strong perception. When you perceive that you are seeing, the perception of seeing is called *saññā*. When you perceive

hearing a cat meowing, the perception of the cat is *saññā*. *Thirasaññā* is when you reaffirm the perception, and it becomes strengthened. This is accomplished by reminding yourself of the experience, as “seeing, seeing”, or “hearing, hearing”. Reminding yourself of what you are experiencing strengthens the pure perception of the experience, giving rise to mindfulness.

The texts say that mindfulness is like a pillar because it is firmly founded. The ordinary mind is like a gourd floating on water that flits about here and there. Mindfulness is like a pillar sunk in the bottom of a lake. No matter how the wind or water buffets the pillar, it does not shake. Mindfulness is also said to be like a gatekeeper; it guards the eye, ear, and other sense doors where all of our experience comes and, therefore, all of the problems. Mindfulness lets experiences enter without letting in the defilements.

What, then, is wrong mindfulness? There are four ways we might think of wrong mindfulness: unmindfulness, misdirected mindfulness, lapsed mindfulness, and impotent mindfulness.

Unmindfulness is just the opposite of mindfulness. It has the following four aspects:

1. *pilapana* – wobbling
2. *samosa* – forgetfulness
3. *visayabhimukhabhava* – not confronting
4. *athirasanna* – weak perception

If you never go to a meditation center or never take up the practice of meditation you are generally unmindful and therefore your mind wobbles. Your mind is also forgetful, so you cannot remember things that happened yesterday and you can never remember the present moment; you experience something and immediately, you react. You do not face objects of experience because of weak perception. You perceive something, but your mind is not trained to stick with the simple perception, so you get lost in your reactions.

Misdirected mindfulness means mindfulness that is focused on the wrong object. This type of mindfulness is not intrinsically wrong, just wrong for a specific practice. If you want to go to Niagara Falls you've got to get on the QEW (Queen Elizabeth Way highway). If you get on the 400, you are on your way to Sudbury. It is not that there is anything wrong with the 400. It just does not lead to Niagara Falls. By the same token, if you practice mindfulness of the past,

remembering past lives for example, it is never going to allow you to attain enlightenment because it is focused on the wrong object. There is nothing technically “wrong” with the past; it is just a mundane, conceptual object. Mindfulness of the future, when you plan ahead or have an experience of precognition where you see something before it happens, could also be considered a form of mindfulness, but it does not help you either because it is also not focused on actual reality as you experience it.

If you focus on concept, for example a candle flame, eventually you are able to see this object in your mind conceptually. When this happens, the object is stable, satisfying, and even controllable. You can expand and contract it in your mind. You can enter into very high states of calm taking a concept as an object, but it is not going to lead you to enlightenment. It is not *anicca* (impermanent), *dukkha* (suffering), or *anatta* (non-self). You will never see the three characteristics through mindfulness of concepts, so for the purposes of enlightenment, it is misdirected.

Lapsed mindfulness is like unmindfulness except that it arises in someone who is practicing correctly. We, as meditators, are not robots or machines. This is not an assembly line where we pass people through and they all come out enlightened. Everyone has conditions in which they come to meditation, and every meditator has a different experience. Often, this shows itself in positive or negative states; deep states that are kept hidden inside. As previously discussed, the imperfections of insight describe some of the positive states that result from proper practice. These positive states will not lead to enlightenment, although sometimes meditators start to think that they will and are led astray.

Impotent mindfulness relates to an absence of the other factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. If you have wrong view, you will not see clearly no matter how mindful you are. If you still believe in things like a soul or self or you do not believe in karma, or you think that God created us; all of these views will prevent you from seeing ordinary experiences clearly. The same goes for wrong thought, bad intentions or ambitions, and cruelty in the mind; these will all get in the way of mindfulness practice. If you lie, gossip or just talk a lot, it is going to get in the way of mindfulness. If you are a murderer or a thief, if you take drugs or alcohol. You can try your best at being mindful, but if you are not keeping the five precepts, you will not see clearly. I would never guide someone through a meditation course if they were not able to keep at least the five precepts. It is just futile. If you practice wrong livelihood, making a living from bad things, or if

you practice wrong effort, being lazy or directing effort towards the cultivation of unwholesomeness; all of these will prevent mindfulness from being effective. If you are unfocused through wrong concentration or if you are focused on the wrong things, these will make whatever mindfulness you have impotent. The Eight-Fold Path must work together with mindfulness, as mindfulness is not enough. Mindfulness is like the key that starts the engine; it gets everything going, but if your engine is broken the key does not do much.

So, these are what I would consider wrong mindfulness. The consequences of wrong mindfulness are regression, stagnation, and complication. Regression happens when you get discouraged. Instead of gaining wholesome states, you regress and become unmindful, afraid of or upset with the practice. You think the practice is useless because you are not practicing properly. This may cause one to leave the practice and Buddhism, may even lead one to disparage Buddhism as useless. Stagnation is another danger, and meditators may practice for years without progressing if their mindfulness is not well-directed. Some meditators may experience great calm and peace in their practice, but never gain insight because they fail to cultivate the four *satipaṭṭhāna*. Complication is the third consequence and is the most dangerous. Mindfulness is designed to simplify things; as the Buddha said, "when you see, let it just be seeing". This is how you should train yourself. When you are hearing, let it just be hearing. When you experience something, let it just be the experience. When you are unmindful, or if you have a distorted state of mindfulness in which one of the path factors is missing, your perception is complicated, rather than simplified. This can actually lead to mind-states that are more tense, stressed, or poisonous, and through repeated and intensive practice you may lose your mindfulness entirely and become temporarily insane, unable to control yourself. I have seen this happen to meditators, though I have never had it happen to someone practicing under my guidance. Without close and proper guidance, some meditators may lose their mindfulness, and that can be dangerous. Wrong mindfulness is something we all have to be concerned with.

Difficulties in Meditation Q&A

What is the cure for complacency in practice?

Q: *What is the cure for complacency in practice?*

A: A sense of urgency is a cure for complacency. The easiest way to develop a sense of urgency is association with people who have a sense of urgency. When you are alone it is very easy to become complacent, even resigned to failure because the practice is difficult. Without encouragement and support from others on the path, it is easy to get weighed down by the sensual world and pulled away from the path by those who are disinclined to practice. Associating with good people is the most important thing in the spiritual life. Listening to talks or reading books, studying, getting teachings can also be a part of association.

Another useful practice is meditative reflections, on death and the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and non-self in a conventional context; like the idea that all of the things we cling to will one day change and disappear; the realization that nothing is stable and that at any moment we could be subject to great suffering from any number of causes: sickness, accident, natural and human-made disaster, robbery, crime, punishment etc. Thinking about these sorts of things, meditating on the inevitability of suffering and death, meditating on the repulsiveness of the body, meditating on the nature of the body parts as being not as desirable, etc. allow us to cultivate a sense of urgency and the importance of spiritual practice.

Find a meditation center, do a meditation course, stay with a teacher, and do the best you can. Do not expect yourself to be the perfect meditator; sometimes you may be discouraged or overwhelmed by worldly affairs, so just try your best to cultivate as much impetus to practice and do what you can. Ultimately, the path to enlightenment is a difficult and sometimes roundabout one.

Our teacher Ajhan Tong was asked this same question, and he said: “you can't succeed in the world if you don't work hard. How could it be any different in the practice?” Sometimes we might think of the Dhamma as some kind of hobby or pastime, something that we do on weekends or holidays. By not taking it seriously, just like any worldly pursuit, if you don't cultivate it, if you don't work hard at it, you cannot hope to succeed.

Difficulty in Socializing

Q: *What is the purpose for seeking solitude for meditation? How does one seek solitude?*

A: True solitude is a state of mind. Solitude is something you can find anywhere; solitude of mind is called *citta viveka*. *Kāya viveka* means seclusion of the body, which is of course useful and makes finding tranquility easier, but if you are truly mindful you can be in solitude anywhere.

Solitude means being alone, “solo” or “singular”. We commonly say that a person is alone when there is no other being nearby, but another meaning of alone is alone in the moment, in terms of time and space - not thinking about the past or future, or some place other than where you are. If we get caught up in the past or future, feeling bad about past experiences, worrying about the future, or if we get caught up thinking about other people, places, and things, we are not isolated, we are not in solitude.

Solitude

Q: *Do some enlightened beings retreat into solitude? The Buddha did not do that, but do you think you would consider that decision respectable?*

A: Yes, absolutely. The Buddha himself retreated into solitude more than once. If the Buddha hadn't been asked to teach, it is likely that he would have just retreated into solitude for the remainder of his life. Solitude is completely respectable. There are many stories of Arahants who lived in solitude. The Buddha was clear that there are many different ways to live as a Buddhist. You do not have to live in solitude, but it is not wrong. The most important thing is that you practice mental solitude, keeping yourself secluded from mental impurity.

Do Emotions Become Stronger in Meditation?

Q: *When wanting arises, I start meditating on the wanting by saying “wanting, wanting”, and the wanting becomes stronger. It seems like I am only suppressing the wanting rather than getting rid of it completely. How do I overcome this?*

A: What you are experiencing is actually a good thing, because you have stopped suppressing or avoiding your emotions. That is why the emotion presents itself so strongly. The meditation is not cultivating desire. You have a propensity to give rise to massive amounts of desire and the meditation brings your awareness to this phenomenon. Normally, rather than dealing objectively with our habits of desire and aversion, we react to them, trying to appease or “fix” them, and that

is why we do not experience them so strongly. It is like taking your garbage and throwing it in your closet; every time you want to dispose of your garbage, you just throw it in the closet. And where does that lead? You end up with a closet stuffed full of garbage because you are ignoring the problem rather than dealing with it. Meditation is akin to opening that closet door and having all that garbage fall down on you. As you begin this practice, your immediate perception is that it was wrong to open the door and that there is something wrong with the meditation. And so, you have a choice here. You can keep all your garbage packed into that closet and keep throwing more in or you can take the time to clean it out. Dealing with each piece of detritus directly as you pick it up and examine it.

This is a common experience for new meditators and another thing to note about it is that desire itself is not likely what you experience as increasing. What you experience are the physical manifestations of the desire, in the brain and in the body. A good example is lust. Ninety-nine percent of it is not desire. The chemical reactions, the bodily changes, the hormones and so on - these are all entirely physical. This is why it is very important to be able to break up experiences into their component parts. When you meditate on the desire, you are allowing your body to give rise to these states that normally you would suppress. The great tension in the body that would suppress many of these systems is given a chance to release. The chemicals will arise along with physical pleasure and then the desire arises for more such pleasure. It can be that when you first start to meditate, the delusion and guilt is preventing you from seeing this. But when you meditate regularly, you will see the desire actually disappears, and only the physical pleasure that would normally have been associated with desire persists. If you remind yourself “wanting, wanting”, as well as “happy, happy” or “pleasure, pleasure” or even “feeling, feeling”, you experience bodily relief (including chemical relief in the brain) because there is less tension due to less desire, less guilt, less anxiety, etc. One really good way of understanding this, is to think of how you have been suppressing or restricting the flow of the various bodily systems and now those built up blockages are flowing out as you engage in the practice of mindfulness.

Desire is the moment when you like something. It is only a very small part, the mental part, of the experience. Desire is when the mind cultivates partiality for a particular experience. It categorizes experiences as positive. It is important to focus on the desire objectively, rather than trying to remove it. But, you must also be mindful of the pleasurable experiences in the body that are separate and distinct.

Further, when the wanting seems to become stronger, it can also be that you just see it more clearly. You begin to understand that it has been there all the time, but you did not see it so clearly before. In meditation, we face things that we normally avoid, ignore, or react to. This is a very clear point that many people miss about the Buddha's teaching. If you read the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* the Buddha says "When you have sensual desire, you know in yourself I have sensual desire, there is sensual desire in the mind. When it is not present, you know it is not present." This is very important. This creates the equanimity that we are talking about. It allows you to see the progression of states. It allows you to see how greed works, how anger works, how desire works, and how the mind works in general. It may not be that it is stronger, but that you are actually, not only more aware of it, but admitting it to yourself, where previously you may have avoided it out of guilt or aversion. We may tell ourselves "I am not a greedy person, I am not an angry person" all the while suppressing greed and anger. And then, when the meditation seemingly makes us feel greedy and angry, we blame it on the meditation.

Am I Suppressing Emotions?

Q: *I am trying to observe my emotions but I am somewhat out of touch with them and I control them a lot. When an emotion goes away, how can I tell if it has subsided on its own, or if I suppressed it?*

A: I would not be so analytical about it because the analysis itself is somewhat of a misunderstanding. The concern that you are suppressing, not accepting and not learning about the experience is often a misunderstanding of what is actually happening. The emotions themselves will cause stress, and that is why there is stress in the mind; it is not because you are somehow suppressing them. When certain emotions arise, we often give rise to additional conflicting emotions, and that is where it starts to get confusing. The desire to suppress is stressful, and this is something that you can see if your mind is quiet. Anger is stressful and the desire to suppress anger is stressful. This will lead to things like tension in the body and suffering in the mind, so what you are probably experiencing is quite a bit of suffering. Try to think about the suffering objectively; when these thoughts arise, along with the worries, confusion, and uncertainty, remember that part of the difficulty that you are having is the struggle to see impermanence, suffering and non-self. It is a struggle to stop trying to fix things. Thinking that something is wrong with your practice is actually kind of misleading. There is

nothing called practice and you are not doing it; there is only experience, and it is coming and going. Once you realize that, then all of your problems disappear like knots becoming untied.

Every moment is a new knot. Every moment in your meditation is a new challenge, and the stress occurs when we fail to meet the challenge, when at any given moment we abandon mindfulness and cling to something. Without mindfulness and wisdom, we do not have the flexibility to be able to move from one challenge to the next; this flexibility is one reason that enlightened people are so bright and clear in mind. For example, when focusing on pain, thinking "pain, pain", after some time your mind finally realizes it is just pain, then maybe some kind of pleasure comes up, but you are still thinking about the pain, which makes you unable to deal with the new experience. Each experience has to be dealt with as it is, with no reference to past or future. The first shift of awareness regarding the pain was to convince yourself that the pain, rather than being bad, is just pain, the awareness has shifted to see that it is just pain. Then pleasure arises and again, you have to shift your perspective to see that it is just a feeling of pleasure caused by chemicals arising in the body. You still have to see it for what it is, but the pleasure is coming from another angle of being "a good thing", making you want to cling to it. You have to teach yourself to be present and objective with each experience.

The difficulty is not in suppressing. The difficulty is adapting to the situation, which simply means that no matter which angle the mind is taking, you must straighten it out. If it is crooked this way, one must straighten it back that way. Everything has to be straightened out; whatever the mind is clinging to, one must bring it back to being straight and centered, clearly aware of everything just as it is.

When the feeling that you identify as "suppressing" comes up, acknowledge it as just a feeling and you should be able to see that it is just a feeling based on defilements and emotions. Sometimes you might say, "when I acknowledge 'thinking, thinking', it feels like I get a big headache. When I am thinking a lot, I don't have the headache, but as soon as I start noting 'thinking' I get a big headache," and you start to think that the noting is causing you suffering, but if you are observant, you will realize that you were building up the headache without knowing it during the time you were thinking, and when you realize you are thinking and you start noting "thinking, thinking", you suddenly have to deal with the headache.

When you have lust or desire, you might focus on it by saying, “wanting, wanting” or “pleasure, pleasure,” and you may feel tension in the body as you do so, but the tension is there because of the desire itself. Instead of tension, you might feel the dullness of mind that comes with desire, and you may think, “oh, this is coming from meditation. I am suppressing this in the meditation, so it is giving me this feeling of dullness!” but the desire is what causes the dullness. The emotions themselves bring the physical feelings as a byproduct. When you start to practice, you are just beginning to see objectively. The moment when you had desire you were not seeing things objectively. That is why the desire feels wonderful until you are mindful of it because, suddenly, you are objective again, and you are seeing both sides: the good and the bad. With desire, you are running towards the good and running away from the bad, so that you never really experience the bad until you stop running, and then you experience it. Eventually, you experience the bad and you have to deal with it.

I would advise not to worry too much even if you are suppressing: the most important thing is to watch the suppression, not to stop suppressing. Just watch and see what is going on, because inevitably, you will come to see impermanence, suffering, and non-self. You will see that you cannot control your experiences; you will see that even the suppressing is something that only happens based on causes and conditions; it is not worth getting caught up in or attached to.

Does Meditation Inhibit Repression of Emotions and Memories?

Q: *In the context of my daily meditation practice, I find the concept of repression of emotions hard to grasp. Do you think meditation inhibits people from being able to repress emotions or memories?*

A: Repression is a bit of a difficult concept. It is not dealt with the same in Buddhism as it is in ordinary discourse. Repression is usually seen as a negative thing, something that causes problems. “Digging up” is often seen in ordinary discourse as a good thing to do, to come to terms with our repressed emotions. There are some parallels to this in Buddhism, but it is not understood quite the same. Momentary repression of emotions is actually technically what we are doing in the practice of meditation. When you practice loving-kindness meditation, you are repressing or suppressing the anger through the force of loving-kindness. Through the practice

of mindfulness, when you say “pain, pain” or so on, the anger is being repressed. It is understood as prevention, stopping it from arising as technically there is no emotion being suppressed and there is no suppressor. There are only momentary experiences that arise and cease. Technically, when you “repress” something all that happens is you create a specific mind state that prevents another mind state from arising.

What we call repression generally has to do with anger; aversion towards the mind state. Something arises and you get angry about it. The anger does not actually repress the emotion - it has already been replaced with the anger. Whatever it was that you disliked or were afraid of, etc., was not repressed, it triggered that response and ceased when the response arose. You might say to yourself “no, no, no - don’t let it come up”, thinking that somehow, you are going to prevent something that has already arisen. You see it as a problem, though it is already passed.

What this does is creates a habit; every time the emotion comes up, rather than dealing with it, you react with aversion, anger, fear, etc., and cut off the emotion. Suppose you experience lust arising. You see a beautiful woman or a beautiful man, and lust arises. Then you might get angry at yourself and feel guilty, thinking, “How horrible! What a sin! What a negative mind state!” When this anger arises, the lust has no potential to continue for the moment. Now you have a different problem, these feelings of guilt, anger, self-hatred and so on. As this becomes habitual, it can seem like you are repressing the lust but you are actually just changing the focus of the mind, complicating the experience rather than understanding it objectively.

The lust, in the first place, is a habit that has developed over time. There is no reason to have attraction to the human body. Science can explain attraction away based on genes, hormones and so on, but from a Buddhist point-of-view, looking at things experientially, in the moment-to-moment mind states there is no reason why we should come to this state of finding the human body pleasant. It is a contrived state: the human body, genes, and hormones, are all part of this contrived state of existence that we have built up, that we have cultivated, as a part of what scientists call natural selection. Emotions like attraction and desire are simple habits, but the evolution of human society has complicated them with habits of guilt, self-consciousness, etc. You might say that this is something that we have cultivated as a species. Now humans have innately in them this feeling of guilt towards sexuality.

This is how what we call repression works. It is just a more complicated habit. In meditation we sometimes have to deal with incredibly complicated habits and mind states. We cannot simply deal with the lust or hatred that we have in the mind. We have to look at how we are reacting to these emotions themselves because our habits and our minds are so complex. Our habits are so complex that we might first get angry, and then we might be angry that anger has arisen, or afraid of it, or depressed by it, and then maybe we try to divert ourselves by finding something pleasurable, and so on and so on. We have tricks and defense mechanisms, and all sorts of habits that we have developed so haphazardly that we have to muck through piece by piece in our meditation practice.

Repression is only a part of the complexity of our minds, and it is really an inexact term. What we should talk about is the complex chains of reactivity our minds are habitually inclined towards. First, we have ordinary lust or anger arising, and then we have our responses to it. We have to be able to deal skillfully with both and unravel them together. Not just dealing with the lust, or what one might call the repression, but dealing with both together. You must also deal with positive mind states, being mindful of everything piece by piece. This is a very important topic to understand from a meditative point of view; to understand that it is not as simple as just repression. It is much more complicated, and rather than trying to say, “I am repressing”, or “I have this tendency”, we should look at the experiences moment to moment. Meditation is, in one sense, simply becoming increasingly skillful at facing the convolutions and knots in the mind without perpetuating them.

When the Buddha was asked who could untangle the inner tangle (the complex reactions we have been discussing), and the outer tangle (the objects that trigger our reactions), he said that a wise and energetic Bhikkhu will be able to untangle the tangle by means of morality, concentration and wisdom. Briefly, from a meditative point of view, morality is developed by bringing the mind back to the object, concentration is the focus that arises when you do that, and wisdom is what you see when your mind is in focus. The meditation practice then, is the development of morality, concentration and wisdom that slowly allows you to simplify and purify your habits, bringing your mind to experience reality as it is, instead of reacting and then reacting to your reactions.

Fear Upon Losing Awareness

Q: *I have a problem. The moment I lose awareness the fears and negative emotions are attacking me. It is impossible to maintain constant awareness all the time. Can you give me some advice?*

A: The real problem is in trying to maintain awareness. Let's call awareness 'X' and negative emotions 'Y'. So the general statement is "as soon as I lose X, Y happens. The real problem is the dependency on X. If your peace of mind depends on something, that is the crutch for you. That thing that you depend on is the problem. That is the basis of Buddhist practice. You have to start by observing the need, in this case the need to be aware all the time. What you are seeing is that your mind is not stable, satisfying, or controllable, and this makes you think there is some kind of problem. Actually, you are beginning to see the nature of your mind; you are starting to see things as they are. This is what you see when you practice mindfulness, that you can't control even your own mind. The attachment to some stable, constant awareness has to be dealt with before you can approach the fear and negative emotions. If you are distracted, note "distracted, distracted"; if you want to be alert, focused and aware, note "wanting, wanting"; if you dislike the fact that you have lost focus, note "disliking, disliking", etc.

As for the fear and negativity, even these are not problems; they are just experiences. Seeing them as a problem will only make things worse, as you will react to them, feeding further negativity. So start just looking at them; look at everything that arises. Do not think to yourself, "Oh, this is no good because I am going to get afraid again," or "What about those negative emotions that I had yesterday. What if they come back?" when you could be focusing on what is right here and now. Awareness is right here and now; you can create awareness at any moment. You cannot lose it because you did not have it. You create it in one moment and that is the moment that you have awareness. Specifically, we are trying for a type of awareness that is firm and objective, where you simply know the object as it is without any kind of judgement or extrapolation. You can create this type of awareness at any moment. The labeling or noting is a recognition; it reaffirms the recognition of the object: when you recognize something, you reaffirm that recognition with the labeling and you keep the mind at bare recognition without getting caught up in it. When this is done, all negative emotions disappear in a moment and only the physical manifestations are left.

Negative emotions last for only a moment but they affect the body, so for example you think you are still angry because you have a headache, tension in the body, heart is beating, etc., but none of those things are anger. Rather they are physical manifestations caused by the anger. You can focus on the physical manifestations and deal with them but the actual anger only lasts for a moment. If you are unmindful of the physical manifestations, anger can arise again, creating a cycle of stress and suffering. The same goes for fear: not all of what we call fear is actually fear. Fear is a momentary mental state that causes changes in the body, and then we associate these changes with fear and become upset about them, get more afraid, and it snowballs. If you are mindful of both the emotions and the physical manifestations moment to moment, slowly they will work themselves out.

Be patient, be realistic, do not have expectations and consider that you are here to learn. That is why they call it practice, not perfect. You are not here to perfect. We are here to practice and more importantly, you are here to learn; it is not a magic trick where you sit and meditate and then poof, you become enlightened. It is not like pulling a rabbit out of a hat. It is learning; learning more about yourself, more about reality and that is what you have done in noticing this situation. You really learned something, and are continuing to learn about something that you do not want to accept; you are learning the hard truth that you cannot control the mind.

Trying not to feel guilty and trying not to beat yourself up is a very important part. People often experience guilt and anger for not being a perfect meditator. We feel the need to be perfect at everything, so we spend most of our lives beating ourselves up because we are not perfect.

The Hindrances – Introduction

The first set of dhammas discussed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* are the hindrances. Before all other dhammas, for someone who is practicing *satipaṭṭhāna* or mindfulness, the first meditation object outside of the body, feelings, and the mind is the hindrances. They are taught first because they are strongest and most persistent in new meditators.

Our ordinary relationship with our state of mind is problematic because it is backwards. When we like or want something, we take it as an indication that we need to get that something; that we should obtain the object of our desire. When we dislike or are angry at something, we take it as an indication that we should do whatever we can to get rid of the object of our aversion. When we are tired, we take it as an indication that we should sleep. When we are distracted or restless, we take it as a sign that we should get up and do something, anything. This is not intellectual; it is just how we react. Our whole being is conditioned to react in this way. When we are confused or when we have doubts about something, we take it as an indication that we should stop what we are doing and reject it. We live our lives trying to fit the world around our expectations and personality. How often do we make decisions based on our likes and dislikes? We think that it is natural to do so; that if you do not like something, why would you tolerate it? And if you like something, we think of course that is where you should focus your effort.

Unfortunately, the results of this are not as positive as we might think. When you chase after what you want and what you like, you find yourself bound tighter and tighter to those things that you like and your happiness becomes more and more dependent on them. This is how the addiction cycle works. When we are angry or averse to something, we become vulnerable to it, we become more and more averse, fragile, or vulnerable to its arising. We also become more and more susceptible to anger, disappointment and displeasure when it arises or when it cannot be removed.

If we just sleep whenever we are tired, contrary to popular opinion, that does not actually give us more energy. There is a real problem with this for meditators who come to practice mindfulness, because psychologically they have this idea that if you are tired you should sleep, and that sleep will somehow make you less of a tired person. It is actually somewhat the

opposite: the more quickly you give in to sleep, the more habitually prone to drowsiness you become. Of course, your body does need sleep based on your daily physical and mental activities but if you are very mindful you need far less sleep and are far less susceptible to drowsiness than most people.

If you are restless and you just get up and find something to occupy yourself with, you become prone to restlessness; you become more distracted by nature. As with the other hindrances, we react to our state of mind and try to fit the world around it to appease it, rather than learning to have our state of mind fit the world. We need to see how these hindrances are actually the biggest reason for us not being able to fit in with the world properly or live without stress or suffering.

If we are always doubting then we just become someone who doubts everything. We can never accomplish anything of any great significance because doubt arises habitually and we find ourselves doubting even things that present themselves right in front of us and are clearly observable. This happens for meditators; they will achieve positive results in their practice but later doubt what they achieved. One day they will have great results and be sure the practice is beneficial and the next day they forget those results and doubt whether the practice has any use whatsoever.

The states of mind discussed above are hindrances. There are positive, good mind states but there are also bad, harmful mind states. In this practice, we don't consider our normal states of mind as proper cause for action, speech or even thought; we instead focus on cultivating those states of mind that lead naturally to wholesome speech, deeds, and thought. This is why we focus on our mind states as objects of meditation. Rather than allowing our mind states to guide us, we guide ourselves back to the states of mind themselves, to study them and understand their true nature.

Another common way people deal with troublesome mind states is to reject them, suppress them, or try to avoid them. One might think, "Desire is bad? Okay, I will just get really upset every time I want something. Anger is bad? Well, I will feel really bad about that, and then I will get angry at the fact that I am angry. If I am tired, then I will try to force myself to stay awake, and tire myself out by working really hard. If I am distracted, then I will force and exert myself with lots of effort. I will apply the effort to suppress the effort!", as if you can somehow stop

yourself from being distracted. One might think, “If I have doubt, then I will just force myself to believe!”, which of course is the best way to cultivate long-term doubt; it does not get rid of the doubt at all. Instead, in the long term, it just makes you realize how you never really understood or had any good basis for confidence; it prevents you from gaining true confidence. What helps you to gain true confidence and overcome all problematic mind states is honest and objective observation of the states of mind themselves.

The Buddha said the same thing about the hindrances as he did about all other aspects of our experience in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*: that we should be mindful of them. We should see how they arise and cease; we should watch them, observe them and study them. When the mind is full of anger, we should know that it is a mind full of anger. When the mind is full of lust or passion, we should know that it is a mind full of passion. If you see something beautiful or attractive that will give rise to liking, you note “seeing”, and the liking will not arise. If you note this process you are able to understand cause and the effect; you are able to see what leads to what. You can see how desire clouds and colors the mind. You can see how anger inflames the mind and drowsiness stifles the mind.

The five hindrances in brief are liking, disliking, drowsiness, distraction, and doubt. These five states of mind are the most important aspects of the Dhamma to focus on as a beginner meditator because in the beginning you are easily overwhelmed by them. They will arise throughout your practice, but in the very beginning the hindrances will truly obstruct your practice. A new meditator has to be vigilant about the hindrances. If your practice is not going well, there are only five reasons: liking or wanting; disliking, which includes boredom, fear, depression, and sadness; drowsiness or tiredness; distraction or worry or the inability to focus the mind on the task at hand; and doubt or confusion. The hindrances are the only reasons why you really fail and why meditation practice can ever be difficult. If the hindrances do not arise, then you will be able to be mindful of anything no matter what happens. Without the hindrances the mind is flexible and when experiences change, one can be fully focused on the new experiences. When the hindrances do arise it is very hard to accept change; it is very hard to be open; it is very hard to be flexible in the face of impermanence, suffering, or non-self, in the face of unmet expectations.

Liking Q&A

Giving up Pleasure

Q: *Do we need to give up all materialistic pleasure?*

A: No, you do not have to give up any pleasure. This is really key. You have to give up your attachment to pleasure, and that is the difference here. A person can experience pleasure without being attached to it. There are many mental and material states that do not stem from greed or coexist with attachment. Attachment is a sort of stress that brings the mind out of its state of peace and happiness. If you engage in attachment or addiction, wanting, desire, etc., you will only become increasingly miserable as you compartmentalize reality into good and bad; you will not always get what you want for the very reason that you have wants. If, on the other hand, you are able to accept reality for what it is then it is not a question of whether there is pleasure or pain at all; you will be able to live in harmony with the world around you and in harmony with reality as it is: accepting change, accepting the good and the bad, and not labeling things as good or bad.

It is important to understand that you do not have to “give up” anything at all. The point is that you are suffering, and you are likely not clearly aware of your own suffering. Most people are unable to see the extent to which their state of existence is conducive to stress and suffering. Ultimately, we all are suffering. Once we realize that there is suffering we begin to want to find a way out of it, so we start looking, and once you start looking in earnest you begin to realize that the cause of suffering is really your attachments: attachments to pleasure, attachments to being, and attachments to not being. Our attachments are a cause of suffering because we are not able to accept reality for what it is, not able to accept the experience. When you realize the stress that you are causing, you let go automatically. If you see clearly something as causing you stress, there is no thought or intention involved in the response; it immediately changes who you are. Your behavior changes so that you do not repeat your mistake. You would never do something when you have verified for yourself that it causes you suffering. That is the nature of the mind. We only act the way we do because we think it is going to bring us pleasure, happiness, or some sort of benefit.

You do not ever have to worry about having to give something up, thinking, “Oh, I am going to have to give up this or that.” The point is to look closer and see more clearly, and give up those things that stop you from seeing clearly. Of course give up drugs and alcohol because you cannot see objectively when your mind is intoxicated. Give up entertainment to the degree that it impedes your clear investigation of reality; if you do not give it up, you will not be able to undertake scientific inquiry. Once you have done this, start to look. Do not take it on faith, just start looking. The better you understand reality, the more you will give up until finally you give up everything as a matter of course. There is no forcing, pushing, or pulling involved at all. It is wisdom. Once you see things as they are, you do not want to cling because it is not a belief, nor is it a theory, it is understanding; understanding that no happiness comes from clinging.

Wisdom from a Pleasant Glow

Q: *After watching the rising and falling of the abdomen for a while, there is nothing but a pleasant glow. Does wisdom arise spontaneously, or do I need to do more?*

A: That pleasant glow can become a problem for you because you find it pleasant. The experience of sensations as pleasant is one of the most common hindrances. Even meditators practicing for years might feel like they are not progressing because they get stuck on calm or pleasant experiences.

The pleasant glow could be *pīti* (rapture), *sukha* (happiness), or *passaddhi* (tranquility). Whatever you classify it as, it is an experience that comes as a by-product of meditation practice; it is impermanent, it is unsatisfying in the sense that it cannot last forever, and it is uncontrollable in the sense that you cannot turn it on or off. When you sit down and meditate, it comes by itself and it is not yours to control. To confirm these things, say to yourself “happy, happy”, “feeling, feeling”, “liking, liking”, or however it presents itself to you. If you are persistent in acknowledging both the happiness and the liking of it, you will see that just like everything else that arises it is impermanent, unsatisfying, and uncontrollable.

When you do not maintain mindfulness in this way, you are likely to cling to it. Wisdom will not arise unless you are objective and clear of mind, which is not the case if you are enjoying pleasant feelings. There is nothing wrong with such feelings; they can actually be quite useful because they provide you with energy and tranquility in the mind but as soon as you find

yourself enjoying them, even subtly, then you are clinging to it. This can be quite subtle; it can be obscured by delusions about it like the idea that the pleasant feeling is “me” or “mine”. By acknowledging the sensation, “feeling, feeling”, “happy, happy”, “liking, liking” or however it may appear to you, this delusion ceases and you will gain an objective perspective on the arising and passing of experiences.

You will come to see through experience that pleasant feelings are not actually something that you can depend upon. They are not the path or goal of meditation. Seeing that is wisdom, which is the path. Such understanding leads you closer to freedom from suffering. Such wisdom cannot be created; it is not something you can actively cultivate by thinking, reflecting or asking questions about reality. It is something that will arise by itself, but it will only arise if you are objective and clear in your mind. So be careful about pleasant sensations, as they are not the path and like many other “positive” experiences, will only get in the way of your practice if you cling to them.

Avoiding Attraction

Q: *When I see and interact with a specific female, my mind scatters away while I am trying to stay mindful. Would it be okay to disregard what I see and only meditate on what I hear when talking to her, or would that be cheating and not facing the problem?*

A: Yes, sometimes you will want to just focus on hearing instead. One of the parts of the comprehensive practice taught in the *Sabbāsava Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* - MN 2), is *samvara,* which means “the guarding of one's faculties”, a very important part of one's practice.

The *Sabbāsava Sutta* says that in order to support your practice of seeing things as they are, you have to guard your senses. Of course, seeing does not mean looking with the eyes, rather it means directly understanding all experiences as they are. When you are unable to see certain experiences as they are and they cause immediate reaction, this can be a great hindrance in the practice so you should always guard your senses, letting in only those things that you are now able to deal with one by one, in order to observe them clearly as they are.

With the example of beauty, it is not reasonable to expect that someone should overcome their attachment to beauty while being surrounded by many beautiful things; they are much more likely to just give up the practice as they will be overwhelmed by desire. You have to

be able to guard your senses at least until you get to the point that you are able to deal with every situation mindfully. The monk Ānanda asked the Buddha “What should we do in regard to women?” and the Buddha said, “The best thing is to not see them.” Ānanda then asked, “Well, what should we do if we have to see women?” and the Buddha said, “Well, then do not talk to them.” Then Ānanda asked, “Well, what if we have to talk to them?” The Buddha said, “Then be very, very mindful.”

Some people might take the teaching on guarding the senses the wrong way and think that it teaches you to ignore experiences and not investigate them. In truth it simply takes into account the practical reality, the impossibility of coming to see things as they are and letting things be as they are when you are surrounded by things that immediately and violently trigger partiality of any sort.

In order to begin to understand the things that trigger partiality, first you have to remove yourself from them; you have to begin from an empty slate and then face them one by one, to the extent that you are able to observe them without being carried away. You have to think like a scientist and appreciate how much more difficult it is to understand reality than to just live it normally. In order to develop understanding we have to observe experiences one by one; we cannot let everything in and expect to be able to understand it all clearly as it is.

This sounds like that is the sort of thing you are trying to grasp. The best thing to do from a practical standpoint is to run away from this woman and not have any contact with her. That’s most likely quite difficult, so if you do not run away and break contact with her, you should use your situation as a laboratory. Do not go out of your way to see her nor go out of your way to avoid her. Try to see her in moderation, and slowly develop mindfulness based on the experiences you have while around her. Once you have set it in your mind that “this is a meditation object for me” then, eventually with practice, every time you see the object of your desire you will be able to be mindful..

When you sit down on a meditation mat, immediately your mind says “Now I am meditating”; you are on a meditation mat and your legs and hands are in a special posture, you are sitting in a special way so you think, “This is meditation.” On the other hand when we do something like eating, we think, “This is eating”, and so we lose our mindfulness because we don’t think of it as meditation. If we thought of eating as a meditation practice we would eat the

whole meal mindfully. In some Zen Buddhist centers they practice eating in a very specific manner and as a result, they can eat very mindfully. So, you can take your relationship with this woman as being a meditation object, and every time you see her it is a meditation session.

The other thing I would recommend is to not be too hard on yourself. You will fail sometimes and you will fall into liking things and people and you may wind up being totally blown away and unmindful, but that is just another experience for you to learn from. If you react to your failures in a negative way, you will learn nothing from them.

There is the saying, “We learn from our mistakes.” but we do not always learn from our mistakes. We learn from our mistakes when we actually have the presence of mind to understand what went wrong and accept that we have made a mistake objectively without reaction. We do not learn anything from mistakes if we get angry and upset about them. At the time when you like this woman and are attracted to her beauty, you should not be saying to yourself, “Oh, I am such an evil nasty person. This is sinful and bad.” It is important to accept when you make mistakes, and to see the experience of making mistakes as it is. Preparing yourself is one thing but you must acknowledge when you do feel desire. You cannot stop yourself from experiencing it.

Western society is so caught up with the sin of sexuality and things like masturbation. Masturbation for example, is an issue that people feel utterly wretched about; they feel terribly guilty as though they have committed some cardinal sin by doing something that they actually like doing. Deep down their heart says, “This is good; this is pleasant.” So how can you lie to yourself in that way? If you still enjoy it, how can you say it is bad? This is what has led many Hindu gurus to lead their Western students in the other direction. There was even a Zen book that talked about a teacher who taught people to find liberation through sexuality. Some people even teach tantric Buddhism. There are Hindu gurus who believe that Westerners are so sexually repressed that they put them together in a room and tell them to have sexual orgies.

We do not do this because it is reacting; it is reacting to things as being positive. Reacting to things as being negative is no good, but reacting to things as being positive is also not good, as it also leads to the cultivation of habitual tendencies that will create further expectation, clinging, craving, and disappointment, depression, sadness and dissatisfaction

when you are not able to obtain the objects of your desire. What we practice is called the middle way, neither torturing ourselves, nor indulging in sensual pleasure.

Once you have experienced lust and desire, you have experienced it. You cannot change that in retrospect, and yet that is what people often try to do: get upset about it and then get the idea that they are repressing it. You cannot actually repress feelings, you just react to them negatively, which prevents completely any learning that might have come from the experience. At the time when you are attracted to someone, it can be the case where she is married and you feel guilty because she is untouchable or something. It could be that you are married or you are in a relationship with someone else, but you have to accept that you have these feelings.

The Buddha said, "*natthi ragasamo aggi,"* which means "There is no fire like lust." You cannot say to a great raging fire, "Let it stay only here." Similarly you cannot say "Let me only have lust for my wife, or my girlfriend, and not have lust for this person or that person." Where there is the potential for lust to arise, it will arise, and it is uncontrollable. Lust and desire in general are very dangerous. They are habit forming and lead only to greater and greater emotions of the same type, which is uncontrollable and cannot be limited in any way, shape or form to one specific set of experiences. Lust moves from object to object, just like how fire burns from the grass to the bushes to the trees. Whatever is combustible will trigger fire. This is why men cheat on their wives and women cheat on their husbands; it is why we steal and manipulate others, even why we go to war. It is something that you cannot contain. You have to accept that fact, and work to undo the habits. That is really the only way to deal with this.

So, start by limiting your interaction with this person to what is natural. When you know that she is there, you might not want to look, in the beginning. You might just avert your eyes when you are not talking to her, just be mindful of the yearning and agony of unrequited affection.

The yearning and agony that comes from desire is actually an intense amount of suffering. It can ruin both your physical and mental health. It is quite valid practice to avoid and limit your contact. If something is dangerous, where you know you just cannot control yourself then you should avoid that thing; mental corruptions that should be removed by avoid are called *vinodanā pahātabbā*, and those which are to be removed by guarding are called *saṃvarā pahātabbā*.

Disliking Q&A

Meditating When You Do not Want To Meditate

Q: *How do I meditate when I do not want to meditate? I know it sounds like a frivolous question, but it is a serious issue for me. When I sit down, I can meditate for a short time but eventually I get frustrated, my muscles cramp up, it feels like my head is shaking and it becomes really difficult so I end up just getting up. Whatever it is, I make an excuse. I guess my ego is against it or something. I hope it is not a frivolous question because a lot of people recommend just sitting through it. Either I do not have the willpower for it or I am just lazy, but is there any practical advice for that?*

A: We sometimes make the mistake of forcing ourselves to meditate, which is not great because it will cultivate an aversion to meditation. That being said, in the beginning you do not know what is good for you. The untrained mind is like a child. Parents have to push children to learn; they do not force them but they have to at least direct them. Forcing does not generally have the desired effect and as a result, parents who push their children too hard find they rebel or worse. Pushing a child too hard can destroy their lives due to the intense stress. In terms of mental development, most people are like children; they have never truly grown up. The spiritual part of most of us is quite immature; this is especially true if you are not comfortable practicing meditation. When first starting out, you then have to treat your mind like a child.

In the beginning, you have to be a little bit insistent; consider how you would teach a child. Hopefully you would not force your will on a child to the extent that it would cause them unwarranted stress and suffering, but on the other hand you would not just let your child sit around eating candy or watching cartoons all day. Instead you would try to direct them skillfully in a wholesome direction.

There is no easy answer to cultivating the desire to meditate in the beginning stages of the practice, except to say do not simply force yourself to meditate, and on the other hand do not say, “Well then, I just won't meditate.” I am sure you know this, otherwise you would not be asking this question. You want to meditate; you just do not want to meditate. You know it is good for you intellectually because intellectually you are all grown up, but part of you is still a

child. A big part of the problem is a disconnect from the actual benefits of meditation; we are not machines where you can input the benefits of meditation, and have those inputs stored in our programming. You can tell yourself the benefits or listen to a talk on how great meditation is and think, “Meditation is awesome. I want to meditate!” but then your mind will change and you will lose this feeling. It is common during beginner meditation courses, where you will be practicing and say, “Wow this is so wonderful, meditation helps me so much,” and then the next day you feel completely different and say, “I want to leave. This is useless. What am I even doing here?” The reason for this is that we are organic. Our mind is a part of the organism and it is not like a computer. It is going to act irrationally, so a part of the practice is going to be stepping back and saying, “Ok, yes. I do not want to meditate, I acknowledge that,” and not ignoring it but not clinging to it either.

When you acknowledge the mind state that does not want to meditate and you will find that you are able to take the frustration and disliking as an object, and you find it evaporates with patient observation. Try to be very aware of the aversion to meditation, understanding that after some time you do grow up, and as you grow up you will want to meditate more. This is not an insult, as most of us start out in a similar situation. Understand that in the beginning you are going to have to coax and cajole and play games with your inner child to help it grow up.

Beyond this, there is room for some amount of philosophical conversation with yourself about the benefits of meditation, as long as you acknowledge both sides of the argument. If you do not give the defilements their fair trial, once the aversion to meditation arises, it is too late; it is already unwholesome, so pushing it away is not going to help. This is why the Buddha said that when aversion arises in the mind, the key is to see that aversion has arisen in the mind and not be prejudiced against it before you see clearly its true nature. This is how a judge works: they do not judge, rather they observe and they come to a decision based on the facts, instead of any kind of judgment.

You should be able to feel the difference between forcing yourself to accept something and truly understanding it. Just like some religious people believe in God because they are afraid to go to hell, or their parents have told them to, or even intellectually, as opposed to actually truly understanding whether God exists, you will feel the difference between accepting meditation because someone told you it was beneficial or because intellectually you believe it is

right and actually getting a sense of how good meditation is for you. The latter is much more valuable.

Anger, Mindfulness and Repression

Q: *When I experience a situation where I feel angry and try to be mindful, I feel that I am repressing it by saying "Angry, angry," and trying to investigate it. Afterwards, I feel frustrated. Am I doing something wrong in the practice? Am I catching the thought too late or am I still not advanced enough?*

A: From what I have seen, the reason why people feel like they are repressing anything by acknowledging or noting is because strong emotions like anger are associated with a painful feeling. Anger will often create physical suffering like headaches, tension and pain throughout the body. When you say to yourself, "angry, angry," the anger disappears in the mind but you are still left with the unpleasant feelings, which are actually a result of the anger, not a result of mindfulness.

Another example of this is when you are distracted, thinking about many things. When you finally realize you have been distracted and say "thinking, thinking" or "distracted, distracted", if you notice a headache from the brain activity you might think, "Oh, being mindful causes headaches", but that is not the case; it is actually the excessive thinking that causes headaches.

It can also happen that when you say, "angry, angry," you say it with anger or frustration, so instead of being mindful and having a wholesome state of mind, you are still biased and clinging to the experience. It can also happen that you do not have faith in the practice, so you note with doubt; you say, "angry, angry," but you are not focusing with confidence on the experience. You might just say the words and hope something good happens like magic.

Finally, it can also happen that you are practicing correctly, but your mind is not working correctly. You are doing everything right but your mind is not cooperating, which means you try to be mindful and you cannot be mindful; you try to catch something and you catch it too late; you try to clearly see something and it is already gone and as a result of these shortcomings you get frustrated. The truth is that this sort of experience is a sign that you are seeing clearly -

seeing impermanence, that even your own mind is unpredictable: sometimes you can be mindful, and sometimes you cannot; seeing suffering, as your mind is not the way you want it to be; and seeing non-self as you cannot control your own mind. Until you are familiar with these qualities of reality, you may be susceptible to reactions like frustration. Those reactions are the problem, not the inability to make your experience stable, satisfying, and controllable. Impermanence, suffering, and non-self is the unavoidable nature of reality, but we do not like reality, we cannot bear it; we cannot bear impermanence, we cannot bear suffering and we cannot bear non-self.

Even just watching your stomach rise and fall may lead to frustration. The experience might feel pleasant and peaceful at first, but when it changes you think, “What am I doing wrong?” Then you try again and again to make the experience pleasant and peaceful, and you become frustrated, thinking, “I cannot do this. This is useless.” But the truth is you are doing it. The problem is not the experience of impermanence, suffering, and nonself; the problem is the frustration. When frustration arises in the mind, you must focus on the frustration, saying to yourself “frustrated, frustrated”. If you focus on it objectively, you will see that just like everything else it disappears in its own time.

Every time you get frustrated it is a chance for you to build patience, and patience is an integral part of what we are trying to cultivate. Patience is associated with wisdom. True patience means just seeing things as they are and not getting upset about them when they come or go. Develop patience and the ability to see moment to moment experiences as they are. Your frustration about that meditation is stopping you from doing this. The frustration will hinder that ability to see the moment to moment experiences; frustration will hinder it, desire will hinder it, all kinds of delusion will hinder it.

All of our judgments about our practice will stop us from cultivating it. If people think the practice is not working for them, this is just wrong view and wrong thought. I have heard people tell me that they have been stuck in meditation for five or even ten years. When someone feels like they are stuck, the first thing for them to get rid of is the idea that they could possibly be stuck because there is no you and there is no stuck; there is only an experience, and it is amazing that people could waste five years thinking that they are stuck, when in fact, at any moment you can become enlightened if you are clearly aware of the moment. All we are trying

to do is cultivate that clear awareness, and frustration and any kind of judgment about your practice will stop you from doing that.

You are seeing the truth: you are seeing impermanence, suffering and non-self. It is the frustration that is the problem which is coming from your inability to accept those very important aspects of reality. Once you can accept them, and you can see that that is the truth of life and this is the path to enlightenment. You will see that *esa maggo visuddhiyā,* "this is the path to purification."

Drowsiness Q&A

Falling Asleep While Meditating

Q: *How can I deal with falling asleep when meditating? I would like to use meditation for the purpose of being rested but I also still want to be alert.*

A: I would like to caution that your intention to rest may be the reason why you are falling asleep. If that is the only intention that you go into the meditation with, then that is the direction your mind will take. With the intention to feel rested, your mind will not incline towards cultivating effort; rather than becoming more awake or alert, it will tend towards the only way that it knows how to rest, which is to fall asleep. Meditation practiced properly certainly does improve your mind's restfulness but it can only do this if you are alert enough to confront the causes of your exhaustion. The purpose of meditating is to understand reality, especially relating to the difficulties and challenges you face in your mind and your life in general, which requires you to pay attention. Try to re-evaluate what you expect to get out of meditation. Resting is not the purpose of practicing mindfulness.

That being said, even meditators who understand what it is that meditation is for and use it for the purpose of coming to understand reality as it is, may find themselves feeling drowsy and even falling asleep. The Buddha taught seven ways of dealing with drowsiness in the *Pacalāyamāna Sutta* or the *Pacala¯Sutta* of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* Book of Sevens that one could use to overcome various kinds of drowsiness.

The first method the Buddha taught is to change or examine the object of your attention. One of the most obvious reasons why someone might become drowsy is because their mind has begun to wander. You may begin meditating by focusing on a specific object, but over time your mind may start to wander and slowly you may fall into a trance-like state that is bordering on sleep, and eventually leading you to actually nod off. When that is the case it is important to refocus your attention on the original object of meditation. Be careful not to let yourself fall into reflection on speculative thoughts that lead your mind to wander. It is often the case that we remember things that we are worried or concerned about, and they lead our minds to wander and speculate and eventually get tired and fall asleep. The Buddha said to be careful not to give

those sorts of thoughts any ground and to try not to cultivate the states of mind that lead to drowsiness. The best way to accomplish this task is through mindfulness, especially mindfulness of the drowsiness itself. Instead of allowing the drowsiness to lead you away from the present moment, focus on the drowsiness and look at it as the present object. Being mindful in this way breaks the cycle that increases the drowsiness, and if you are persistent, sometimes the drowsiness will disappear by itself. The attention and the alert awareness of the drowsiness is the opposite of drowsiness, and so the drowsiness decreases because of the change in one's mind state.

The second method, if mindfulness does not work, is to recall the teachings that the Buddha taught or that your teacher gave you, and to go over them in your mind. For instance, think about the four foundations of mindfulness, the body, the feelings, the mind, and the various dhammas like the hindrances, the senses and so on. You can consider the body, think about your level of awareness of the body, ask yourself if you are actually able to watch the movements of the stomach or be aware of the sitting posture. You can ask yourself whether you are mindful of the feelings; when there is a painful feeling, are you actually paying attention to it, saying to yourself "pain, pain"? If you feel happy or calm are you actually paying attention or are you instead letting it drag you down into a state of lethargy, fatigue and drowsiness? The same goes for the mind and mind objects. Refer back to the teachings and reflect on them in your mind. Examine the teachings and relate them back to your practice and compare your practice to the teachings. If you do this, first, just thinking about these good things might energize the mind, reminding you of what you should be doing, and second, it will of course allow you to adjust your practice.

If reflection does not work, the third way to deal with drowsiness is to actually recite the teachings. This can be quite useful for lay people; for example, when you are driving. Mindfulness practice while driving, especially at night, can unfortunately involve periods of drowsiness and even nodding off. In such cases, it is safer to switch to reciting the Buddha's teachings. Recitation is not really an intellectual exercise; it is something akin to singing, like when non-meditators turn on the radio and sing along when they are driving late at night. Recitation of the Buddha's teaching will similarly wake you up but also, because it is the Buddhist teachings, it will stimulate you and give you the encouragement you might need. Recitation inclines the mind towards the Buddha and his teachings, and the meditation practice.

If recitation does not work, the fourth method the Buddha taught is more physical. The Buddha suggested pulling your ears, rubbing your arms, massaging yourself and maybe stretching a bit to wake up, to get the blood flowing and give yourself some physical energy. Some people might even go so far as to practice yoga which could be a very useful technique for waking you up, but because it is a different sort of spiritual practice I would not recommend extensive practice of yoga in combination with insight meditation. Still, there is nothing inherently harmful in practicing yoga and it may well be beneficial in moderation for the purposes of building energy necessary to practice meditation. In any case, the Buddha advised massaging and rubbing and pulling your ears and so on.

If physical intervention does not work, the fifth method to deal with drowsiness is to stand up, splash water on your face, and look in all directions. Drowsiness usually comes at night so up at the stars; this sort of external focus can help break the imbalance between concentration and effort, making your mind more energetic, throwing off the weight of lethargy and drowsiness. One of the reasons for walking meditation is that it helps cultivate effort. If you only practice sitting meditation it is not uncommon to feel drowsy. If you do walking first and then sitting, you will generally find the sitting meditation more energetic.

The sixth method is a specific meditation technique, to think of night as day, and to resolve on an awareness of light even though it is dark, as perception of darkness can be a trigger for drowsiness in the mind. The idea is that by imagining light with your eyes closed, it will trigger more energetic mind states. If you practice meditation for extended periods you may actually begin to see bright lights unintentionally. Some meditators become distracted by such lights, colors or even pictures, and we have to remind them not to be distracted by them, to just remind themselves by saying “seeing, seeing”, remembering that they are just visual stimuli. They are not magical and certainly not the path that leads to enlightenment; they can, however, provide the benefit of bringing about energy and effort.

If none of these methods work, the Buddha said one should appreciate the persistence of the fatigued state and lie down. The Buddha’s way of lying down was not on the stomach or back, but on one side, propping the head up with the hand on the head and elbow on the floor. This is known as the Lion’s posture. It is a technique that meditators and monks also use to keep them awake. If you start to fall asleep, your head starts to fall off your arm and you wake

up quite easily. It can also be quite painful in the beginning. It is a physical technique that you have to develop, just like sitting cross-legged. The Buddha also noted, however, that you have to accept that you might fall asleep. If it is not the proper time to sleep, you can lie down and make the determination “I am going to get up in so many minutes or so many hours.” If it is time to sleep you say to yourself, “I am going to sleep for so many minutes or hours,” or, “I am going to get up at such-and-such a time.” Before you go to sleep, think only about the time of getting up so that when that time comes, your mind will wake you up at that time. It is amazing how powerful the mind can be in this regard; you will often find yourself waking up a few minutes before the time that you were going to wake up, or after however many minutes you intended to sleep.

Once the time has come to get up, the Buddha said to resolve in your mind “I will not give in to drowsiness, I will not become attached to the pleasure that comes from lying down.” One of the great addictions that we cling to is the addiction to lying down and to sleep; we like to lie down whenever we can and sleep a lot because of the physical pleasure that comes from it. The problem with this physical pleasure, of course, is that it is not happiness; it is not the case that the more you sleep the more happy you feel. With too much sleep you in fact feel more depressed, lethargic and distracted; you feel less energetic, less alert, and less at peace with yourself. With this last technique you cannot just lie down and say, “I am going to go to sleep” and fall asleep. You have to be strict about it, saying to yourself, “I am going to set a definite period of time to sleep and when I wake up I am going to get up and go on with my practice.”

Restlessness Q&A

Anxiety and Depression

Q: *How can I free myself from anxiety and depression?*

A: Mindfulness meditation helps us deal with and overcome anxiety, depression and many other mental illnesses. So the answer to your question is quite simple, it is one of the purposes of what we teach and practice. There are, however, two issues that potentially obstruct the proper practice of mindfulness for one who suffers from chronic anxiety or depression.

The first issue is the reification of depression and anxiety. The term reification has great importance in Buddhism. To reify means to give something existence. When we say, "I have an anxiety problem," we have reified that concept; we have conceived of an entity that is monolithic and atomic in the sense of being indivisible. It has become a "thing" that you have to get rid of.

There is a story about the time after the Buddha passed away, wherein the monks were gathered trying to decide what the Buddha's actual teaching was. Buddhism had split into a number of different schools and many of the schools were teaching things that certainly did not bear any resemblance to the original teachings. A king asked one well-respected monk, "What did the Buddha teach? What sort of a teacher was the Buddha?" And the monk correctly answered, "The Buddha was a *vibhajjavādi*." *Vibhajja* means "dissected" or "split apart". The Buddha taught the splitting of atoms. You have this indivisible entity you call anxiety or depression, the Buddha's teaching aims to split it up into its constituent parts. It is about separating the condition, problem, illness, or whatever, into actual realities, because depression and anxiety do not exist. What exist are moments of experience. At an ultimate level that is what is truly real.

For anxiety, there will be moments of experiencing that we lump together as anxiety. Suppose that you have to get up and go onto a stage in front of a hundred people or a thousand people and give a talk. You are sitting backstage or in the audience waiting for your turn and you think about going up on stage. That thought is an experience. Then immediately after that, anxiety might arise, which is another experience. After that initial experience of anxiety, there

may be experiences of butterflies in the stomach, the heart beating fast, or tension in the shoulders and, based on those experiences, other experiences will arise. This chain of experiences can create a feedback loop which is how panic attacks arise; you enter this feedback loop based on moments of experience that spiral so far out of control, and the habit or the causal chain is so strong, quick, and ingrained in you, that you are unable to get yourself out of it.

Experiences of depression can be similar. There are experiences, maybe something bad happens to you, and maybe you become sad, and then reacting with sadness becomes a habit and you become more and more sad when you think about that experience, and then you try to get rid of the thought so the thought becomes a source of aversion. You feed it; there is an energy involved with avoiding things or disliking things that creates more negative thoughts and habits.

All of this is just to say that the solution from a Buddhist perspective is to break things into their constituent parts. That is the important first step.

The second issue that gets in the way of dealing with mental illness is the negative relationship we have towards the chain of experiences. To call it a mental illness, even to call it bad, is not inherently wrong, but we have to understand the difference between understanding something is bad for us and feeling bad about it. We feel bad about our depression; we feel averse to it. We feel bad about our anxiety and we want to get rid of it. Taking our patterns of experience as a monolithic condition and feeling bad about that condition are hindrances to actually dealing with the condition. They lead us to seek out ways to not have to deal with the condition directly, taking medication or other drastic measures.

People take medication to cover up anxiety and depression by flooding their systems with serotonin and other brain chemicals that prevent them from following the habits and cycles that they normally would get into. They see anxiety and depression as problems and react negatively to them. In order to begin to face our problems, we must first begin by seeing that our reactions to our problems simply cause us more suffering. Some of what we perceive as depression and anxiety is not even mental at all. For example, butterflies in the stomach, heart beating fast, tension and headaches, etc., are distinct from the actual anxiety. They are not

anxiety, they are merely physical byproducts of anxiety. They are not a problem, and if we can see them as just experiences then we will not react to them, feeding our negative mental habits.

There is no question that depression, anxiety and any mental illness are bad but what is bad about them is that they are reactions. They are bad reactions, and if you react to them by disliking, hating, or feeling guilty about them, you are feeding your negativity, leading only to more anxiety and depression. You can see this in regards to schizophrenia. My understanding of schizophrenia is that it involves what are ordinarily referred to as hallucinations. In Buddhist meditation practice, however, we would simply call them experiences. Maybe you hear voices, maybe you see things, or maybe thoughts arise that you think come from an external source; it is not to ask whether they are real or hallucinations; it is important to understand they are experiences, to see them for what they are, and to not react to them at all.

I met a monk once who told me he heard voices telling him to kill himself. He had difficulty understanding that they were just voices. Even if a real person tells you to kill yourself, it does not mean you should. Without mindfulness, we are carried away by our experiences, reacting before we can appreciate them for what they really are. Being able to see our experiences as experiences is essential to mindfulness meditation.

The first part of the solution is to break our conditions up into individual experiences and to understand, first conceptually and eventually through direct experience, the distinction between entities like depression, where one might think “I have depression”, and the basic building blocks of experience. The second part is to take those building blocks, including the problem, and see them objectively and without reaction. Let them be just what they are; try to create this ability to see experiences objectively. This is what allows wisdom to arise, what allows us to see clearly, and what allows us to let go. Our attachments involve delusion, ignorance, and lack of understanding of what real happiness and peace are; happiness and peace cannot come from trying to fix our “problems” and they cannot come from experiences themselves. Happiness and peace have to come from the way we perceive and relate to experiences.

Calming Down, Panic Attack

Q: I have anxiety panic attacks at least one time per day. How can I calm down? If I think about what is happening, the panic becomes worse.

A: When you are mindful of anxiety, you will see that the moments of anxiety are really not a very big problem at all. Anxiety is a state of mind that causes physical reactions like tensing etc., but it really stops there. Unless we react to anxiety or its physical results in a negative way, it is just an experience. The real problem is not experiences, even inherently negative experiences like anxiety. The problem is our tendency to react to them; to react negatively to a negative experience. The truth is, if you recognize the anxiety as anxiety, the anxiety itself disappears. The anxious mind state is replaced by a mindful mind state. What does not disappear, and what fools you into thinking that you are still anxious, is the physical results of the anxiety, because they are not dependent on the anxiety to continue.

The problem is we get worried about the physical effects of anxiety and say to ourselves, “It is not going away,” and then we get anxious again. The anxiety comes up again and we try to be mindful again. We find that, yes, the effects of it are still there, and so we think the anxiety is still there. Often you need a teacher to point it out to you that the physical and mental are two different things. Seeing the difference between the physical and the mental is the first knowledge gained from mindfulness meditation. When you say "anxious, anxious" or "worried, worried," the worry is already gone; at that moment you are not worried, rather you are focused, mindful, and clearly aware. The physical is something separate from this; the effects of past anxiety will not immediately go away when you are mindful.

What you should do at that point, when you still feel the effects of the anxiety, is see the effects as physical and remind yourself of what they actually are. Note the feeling in the stomach as "feeling, feeling", or "tense, tense". If you react to it, for example by disliking it, you should focus on that new mind state and say to yourself, "disliking, disliking". An anxiety attack is not just anxiousness; it is not an entity that exists continuously. It is many experiences arising and ceasing moment by moment. First there is anxiety, then the physical feeling, then disliking the physical feeling, then anxiety again, etc.; so many different experiences are involved. There can be ego as well, where one might think, “I am anxious.” There can be the desire to be

confident and to impress other people, etc. Your meditation practice is helping you to see that these things are impermanent, suffering, and non-self. They are not under your control. Neither the physical nor the mental is subject to your control. The more you cling to it, the more you try to fix or avoid it, try to change it, or try to make it better, the more suffering, stress and disappointment you will create for yourself, and the bigger the problem will become.

When the anxiety comes, it is correct to say to yourself, "anxious, anxious", and it is correct to focus on it, to be mindful of it and to let yourself be anxious. The anxiety is not the problem. The problem is your reaction to physical states that are caused by the anxiety. Anxiety is just a moment; it is something that occurs in the moment, and then it is gone. At the moment when you are mindful, it is already gone and all that is left is the physical experiences, which should be noted as well. If you can be thorough with this and note what is present in each moment, the physical sensations, the disliking, the thoughts and feelings, you will begin to realize that nothing has the power to hurt you until you react to it. Even negative mind states cannot hurt you until you react to them.

If you are patient with the anxiety, noting it and noting the physical sensations as well as the disliking of the anxiety, even though they do not seem to go away, noting every physical and mental experience that arises from moment to moment you will be able to dispel the perception of being anxious, and you will cease to be disturbed by what you can see are simply individual moments of experience. You will see that they do not have any power over you. This realization is what truly leads to overcoming anxiety. It may take time, effort, and patience, but the path to overcoming both anxiety and fear is easy to follow when you realize that you can be anxious or afraid without having to panic or be consumed by the moments of emotion.

Catching Distractions

Q: *When I get distracted I tell myself "wandering", but when I do that I find myself in a bubble, in a sort of meta view of myself meditating, and soon I find it very difficult to go back whole-heartedly to rising/falling. How do I remedy this?*

A: One of the biggest challenges in mindfulness meditation is catching the essence of your present experience. When your mind wanders, there are probably many associated mind states

arising in sequence. There may be enjoyment of the wandering thoughts, or a worry, fear, stress, etc., and these will contribute to your state of distraction.

The fact that you cannot go back to the rising and falling means it is probable that there is some such mind state that you are not clearly aware of. It is important to see what is happening in the present moment, rather than to think that it is distracting you from your meditation and try to ignore it; it will just make it more difficult to stay focused. It is much more important that you watch what is really holding your attention and focus on it before you even think about going on to note something else. When you have noted the thought, you can return to the rising and falling of the abdomen, but if you feel any emotion associated with the thought, you should focus on that first. If it is difficult to watch the rising and the falling, just focus on that state, even if it means saying to yourself, “unclear” or “distracted” or “cloudy” or however it feels to you. Try to not focus so much of your attention on the rising and falling but focus on whatever your mind is aware of; when that is gone, then go back to the rising and falling.

Doubt Q&A

Doubt About Karma

Q: *If mind is just a concept, what is it that gets reborn or reincarnated that carries our karma? I'm a little confused.*

A: Nothing gets reborn. Nothing gets reincarnated. Nothing carries karma. Karma itself does not exist. Confusion exists. Confusion arises in the mind, and this is much more important than getting an answer to the question. You do not really need answers to these sorts of questions. Getting answers to questions can assuage doubt, but it can also lead to avoiding the real problem of habitual doubting. It is natural to think, "Well, I have doubt, so I need an answer to remove the doubt." If you look at the doubt, however, you can see that it is unhelpful, useless.

The experience of enlightenment does away with doubt. A *sotāpanna* (stream-enterer) is free from the mental hindrance of doubt. Doubt is a hindrance; it distracts and crushes the mind's potential, halts spiritual progress in its tracks. Doubt stops you from seeing clearly and stops you from finding peace. Overcoming doubt is one way of understanding the goal of our practice; giving up the need for answers and solutions to questions and problems. In that sense you do not need answers to any question, even the ones that seem so important.

One common question that people seem to think is important is whether there is such a thing as rebirth. People have even told me that they cannot practice unless they have something to convince themselves of the truth of reincarnation and rebirth. They say that Buddhism makes no sense to them unless they can answer this question. This is a very pitiable state to be in because they probably will never acquire the proof that they are looking for. Even material science does not provide proofs. The only way to prove what happens after this life would be to experience it for yourself, which puts you in the impossible position of having to wait until you pass away before you can practice. I think that often people simply are excited by the idea of remembering their past lives, which is of course just craving.

To directly answer your question, it is not that Buddhists believe in rebirth, it is that Buddhists do not believe in death. This accurately reflects the Buddha's teachings as I

understand them, because death in Buddhism, from an orthodox point of view, occurs at every moment. This is what we mean when we say the mind does not exist. Mind is just a designation for the mental aspect of these momentary experiences, the awareness of an object that is part of any experience. When we talk about the moment of physical death, we are referring to a concept, because in ultimate reality nothing dies at that moment. The mind and body are constantly arising and ceasing together. The physical and mental are arising and ceasing, arising and ceasing, and that does not stop, ever, until you free yourself from craving.

Doubt is insidious. Doubt is not a sign that you need an answer; it is a sign that you have a problem, and the problem is the doubt. Even if you are given answers to all your questions, you will likely still have doubt. The reason for this is not always that you were not given the right answers, but that rather that being given answers is not the answer. The answer is to focus on the doubt. You know you are in doubt so focus on the doubt. Forget about what you are doubting about and focus on the doubt itself, because once you free yourself from doubt, you have done all that you need to do.

That being said, this specific question does have a specific answer, and it is an answer that can be helpful in leading one to focusing on experiences, of which doubt is one. In order to understand reality we have to give up all of our preconceived notions about it, because all you can say for certain about reality without resorting to abstract conceptualization, is that experience occurs. There is seeing; there is hearing; there is smelling; there is tasting; there is feeling; and there is thinking. You can say that pretty reassuredly. The question of whether what you experience is real or not real, or whether you are hallucinating, is meaningless. The experience occurs as it occurs or does not occur at all.

From this basic truth, you can extrapolate and say that it goes against your experience to suggest that experience ceases without remainder. When you watch your experiences arise and cease, you must admit that as far as you can see, experience continues indefinitely. As for what leads to rebirth, you can see that experience forms a sort of causal chain; causes have effects; desire leads to fruition. For example, you want something, which leads to thinking about it, which develops it into actions and situations based on the desire. We can see in this life how craving leads to becoming. At the moment of death, it is not categorically different.

Karma is the relationship between a state of mind, like craving, and subsequent experiences. Wisdom for example, leads to happiness and peace, through seeing how craving leads to suffering. Karma is a relationship from one experience to the next, and as such it does not ultimately exist as more than a concept. You can see for yourself that when this arises that arises; with the arising of this there is the arising of that; when this does not arise that does not arise.

Overcoming Doubt

Q: *Why is it so important to overcome doubt early in the practice?*

A: Doubt is one of the five hindrances. If your mind is consumed by doubt, it will be impossible to commit yourself wholeheartedly to the practice, so overcoming doubt is very important. Purification by overcoming doubt is one of the seven purifications in the *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification), coming after purification of view. Purification of view means changing the way you look at the world, moving from a conceptual view of reality to one based on direct experience. Purification by overcoming doubt relates to doubt about how reality works, so it is logical that it will arise only after you have a proper perspective on reality.

Doubt is a quality of mind that most people deal with on a regular basis, trying to decide what to do with their lives, finding the right course of action in every situation. We doubt about our lives, about what we should do, and about the nature of our world. Much of science was created to help answer questions about the nature of our world and to help us understand reality so that we might live better lives. Religion was created for the same sort of purpose. Both religion and science try to provide us with answers to subdue our doubts, though what we call religion has often been more about belief without basis in evidence, science has been much more about evidence-based knowledge.

Psychologically, there is quite a bit of overlap when it comes to believing something and knowing it. What is important is that you are provided with answers that quell your doubt. Science provides answers based on evidence, and so it is very good at overcoming doubt conventionally. If you rely on science, if you believe and put your faith in science then it is very good at overcoming intellectual doubt, very good at helping one find ways to live one's life. Science cannot, however, free one from doubt completely for two reasons. First, because

science does not know everything and scientists have not found answers to all questions, and secondly because the answers science gives are not one's own answers. Science cannot help you know the truth of your reality. If you look at depression for example, science can help you understand the technical aspects of depression and this understanding may help you deal depression on a superficial level, but it cannot provide you with the direct understanding required to free you from it; likewise for anxiety, fear, and all other sorts of mental suffering. Science cannot tell you how to live your life or how to react to situations; it cannot bring true wisdom. This is what we commonly understand as the difference between wisdom and intelligence.

Religion, on the other hand, tries to provide wisdom, making claims on topics like ethics, happiness, and the nature of reality. Most religion, however, is more about providing psychological support than actual understanding. Belief in God, for example, is best understood as a coping mechanism of sorts. People use God to reassure themselves that there is meaning to life, no matter how hard things get. From a point of view of psychology, God and most of the other concepts we associate with religion are just tools that help cope with the difficulties of life. Most of religion is like this. Buddhists around the world perform all sorts of rituals like chanting, ringing bells, bowing, and so on. Psychologically these are useful practices that help promote positive states of mind but none are really enough for us to completely overcome doubt.

Overcoming doubt is the stage on the path where the meditator begins to actually understand not only the nature and building blocks of reality, but how it works; specifically, how the physical and mental aspects of experience work and interact, and even more specifically how our experiential problems come to be. One of our biggest problems is that we do not even understand our problems. When we feel anxious or depressed, we usually do not even know where it comes from. When you go to the doctor for anxiety or depression, they can explain the cause in terms of the physical state of your brain, which may be conceptually correct, but it is wrong in the sense that this sort of answer cannot free you from depression. It is the wrong answer because it is the wrong type of answer.

The right type of answer is one that we see for ourselves; one in which we comprehend our disorders for what they really are. After becoming familiar with the nature of experience, the meditator begins to see how experiences work in terms of cause and effect. This is called

paccaya-pariggaha-ñana, the second of the sixteen stages of knowledge. *Paccaya-pariggaha-ñana*, or "knowledge that grasps conditionality", is true understanding of the law of karma. In Buddhism, karma means mental inclination, intention or volition. At this stage the meditator observes through direct experience that inclination leads to resultant actions, which lead to resultant effects. There is no need for belief, as the meditator sees directly that certain mind states lead to certain results, which is a crucial part of the mechanics of reality.

Paccaya-pariggaha-ñana involves seeing how craving is a cause for suffering, which often causes some conflict as one wrestles with one's prior perceptions of the benefits of craving. Some meditators' first instinct is to think that something is wrong with their meditation, because they cannot believe that craving leads to suffering. When they want things, they get them, so they see the problem as meditation preventing them from getting what they want. They often see a lot of suffering and stress in their minds at this stage as a result of their attachments. This stage of the meditation can be quite stressful as one is forced to choose between clinging to one's desires or letting them go. Both seem to be potential ways to free oneself from suffering. Your two options are: get what you want, or give up the wanting. Either method theoretically frees you from the wanting and suffering.

Purification by overcoming doubt leads to the knowledge that the things that we cling to are not stable or predictable, not satisfying, and not controllable; these are called the three characteristics of all arisen phenomena. Seeing how phenomena interact with each other on a moment to moment basis leads one to realize that the problem is not the failure to acquire the objects of our desire, but the desire itself. One realizes that if one were content, one would not suffer. The things we cling to are impermanent, unsatisfying and uncontrollable. They cannot possibly provide real satisfaction. They are impermanent, uncertain and unstable. They are suffering in the sense that they are unsatisfying, and if one clings to them, one will suffer, because they cannot last. They are not oneself, they do not belong to one's self, and they have no self of their own to cling to. They are experiences that arise and cease based on causes and conditions.

The realization of the three characteristics can only come about after purification by overcoming doubt, since one must first observe the causal relationships between phenomena before one can understand their value. Freedom from doubt means certainty afforded by direct

knowledge, which provides the mind the fortitude required to attain the higher stages of knowledge and freedom from suffering.

Before attaining this freedom from doubt, you might think that the meditation is causing the impermanence, suffering and non-self characteristics that you observe in your meditative experiences. You might be inclined to stop meditating, so as to return to ordinary reality where things are pleasant, satisfying and controllable. This is because meditation forces you to confront the nature of reality, whereas ordinarily we are constantly avoiding it. Once you see clearly the causal relationship between experiences you have no need to avoid or manipulate reality, as you are able to skillfully respond to any experience without reaction or partiality.

The state of mind before attaining freedom from doubt is like beginning as a carpenter; before you can build a cabinet you have to learn about your tools. In the early stages you are still learning how reality works. Once you do that and the doubt disappears, your mind becomes pliant and wieldy like a tool in the hands of a skilled carpenter. Such a mind is a tool you can apply towards overcoming suffering. That is why it is important to overcome doubt.

Other Types of Meditation Q&A

Samatha and *Vipassanā*

Q: *I started with samatha meditation as I read a lot that you have to calm your mind before starting to practice vipassanā. What is your interpretation of the differences between these two, and which should be practiced first?*

A: *Samatha* means tranquility; *vipassanā* means seeing clearly. The Buddha used these terms together and individually as qualities of mind. When you talk about *samatha* meditation as something separate from *vipassanā* meditation, you are taking the discussion into a post-canonical realm; you are taking it out of the realm of what the Buddha actually said and into the realm of interpretation. I follow the orthodox interpretation that does talk about *samatha* meditation and *vipassanā* meditation, so I do not mind talking about this.

For those people who advise to practice calming your mind first (*samatha* meditation) and then practicing to see clearly (*vipassanā* meditation) after, this means first entering into a trance wherein you can see one thing very clearly. This is only possible if that one thing is a concept, since concepts are lasting entities the mind can focus on at length. Understanding the distinction between reality and concepts is important; it allows us to determine whether a meditation practice will lead to a trance state or a clear understanding of reality. Focusing on concepts will not help you understand reality because you are focusing on something you have created in your mind. It is not real. It does not have any of the qualities of ultimate reality. It is not the same as watching your stomach rise and fall because when you watch your stomach rise and fall it changes constantly. The movements of the stomach are impermanent, unsatisfying, and uncontrollable. Watching the stomach helps you to see reality as it is, and that is difficult.

It is much easier and pleasant to create a concept in your mind. For example, you can close your eyes and at your third eye (in the center of your forehead) imagine a color, and you say to yourself, “blue, blue, blue” or “red, red” or “white, white”, just focusing on the color you have imagined. Once you can fix your mind only on the color, thinking of nothing else, that is considered to be an attainment of the fruit of *samatha* meditation. Many religious traditions,

especially in India, make use of this sort of practice for the purpose of gaining spiritual powers like remembering past lives, reading people's minds, seeing heaven and hell, seeing the future, and leaving your body.

To make use of *samatha* meditation for the subsequent development of *vipassanā*, you simply apply the principles of satipatthana practice to the *samatha* experiences. For example, you can note the focused mind as “focused, focused”; if the experience is pleasurable, you can note “happy, happy”; if you feel calm, “calm, calm”; if the experience involves lights or colors, you note “seeing, seeing”, etc. and as a result of the mindful interaction the experience will change from seeing the stable, satisfying and controllable concept to the impermanent, unsatisfying and uncontrollable reality. Because *samatha* meditation involves the cultivation of powerful mental faculties, when you switch to *vipassanā* meditation, your mind is readily able to see clearly the nature of reality.

For someone who does not take the time to practice *samatha* meditation first, *vipassanā* meditation can be a challenge because the mind does not have the prior training on more pleasurable objects; you have to face pain in the body, distractions in the mind, and all kinds of emotions, without any of the peace and calm of *samatha* meditation. For the most part this means only that the meditation practice is less pleasurable, not slower or less effective. In fact, by starting with *vipassanā* meditation, one avoids the potential pitfalls of becoming complacent or conceited about one’s *samatha*-based meditative attainments, as their training of the mind begins with ultimate reality directly.

The difference between the *vipassanā* meditation and *samatha* meditation is quite profound. *Samatha* meditation is for the purpose of calming the mind whereas *vipassanā* meditation is for the purpose of seeing clearly. This does not mean that *vipassanā* meditation does not lead to tranquility; you should find that through the practice of *vipassanā* meditation you are much calmer in general. *Vipassanā* meditation is differentiated from *samatha* meditation not because it does not involve tranquility, but because tranquility is not the goal. Whether you feel calm or not is not practically important; all that is important is that you see your state of calm or distress clearly.

Samatha meditation cannot lead directly to enlightenment because it is not focused on reality. The only way that it can be used to attain enlightenment is if you follow it up as stated

with *vipassanā* meditation. The strength of mind gained from practicing samatha meditation allows you to see clearer than you would have otherwise. Since the same can be said of developing mental fortitude starting with *vipassanā* meditation directly, the only real benefit to practicing *samatha* meditation first is the states of peace and calm, and maybe spiritual powers if you dedicate yourself to it to a great degree.

It is, in fact, clear from the texts that starting with *vipassanā* is the quicker option of the two. A monk once approached the Buddha and said, "Venerable Sir, I am old. I do not have much time left, and my memory is not good. I am not able to learn everything; please teach me the basics of the path." The Buddha told him that first he should establish himself in an intellectual acceptance of right view and purify his morality, to make sure he is ethical and moral in this behavior. Once he has done that, he has done enough to begin practicing the four foundations of mindfulness. There is no talk about first focusing the mind or entering into any meditative state before focusing on reality.

In mindfulness, one accesses meditative states naturally, entering into them based on reality. Even just focusing on the rising and falling can be considered an absorbed state for the moment that one is observing it. When you say "stepping right, stepping left" in walking meditation, if your mind is clearly aware of the movement, you are in an absorbed state for that moment, so you are cultivating both *samatha* and *vipassanā* at once. You are tranquil and you are also seeing clearly.

Samatha Meditation

Q: *Bhante, based on many of your videos I think you do not like samatha meditation at all. From what I know there are two clear ways for enlightenment: samatha first and then vipassana, or vipassanā first and then samatha. What do you think about this?*

A: Actually, according to the Buddha, there are four ways to enlightenment: *samatha* first and then *vipassanā, vipassanā* first and then *samatha*, *samatha* and *vipassanā* together, or the settling of the mind in regard to the Dhammas. The Buddha said those are the four ways people can become an *arahant*.

Regarding your comment of you thinking I do not like *samatha* meditation at all, I will say that if that is true then it is wrong of me of course, because disliking itself is a bad thing. I admit

that I tend to discourage people from focusing their attention on cultivating *samatha* meditation. I do not ever say to not practice it, rather I try to focus on the benefits of *vipassanā* meditation. There are two reasons for that. First, *vipassanā* meditation is what I know, so it is what I am best suited to help them with. If instead I start talking about the benefits of *samatha* meditation, I am not going to be able to help anyone realize those benefits. I will end up saying to them, “I am sorry I do not teach *samatha* meditation, you will have to go somewhere else.” So it is better for me to promote *vipassanā* meditation, because I can help with that directly. The other reason I do not recommend *samatha* first is because that path seems to me to have three disadvantages: it seems to take longer, it requires more effort, and it has a greater potential for falling into wrong practice.

The benefits of practicing *samatha* meditation first are that it is more complete and more powerful. More complete means it provides the potential to enter into profound states of calm and tranquility, where one can sit stiff as a board, in deep bliss or calm. It is also more complete in the sense that it allows the cultivation of magical powers; reading people's minds, remembering past lives, all sorts of fun stuff. It is more powerful in that one's ability to enter and remain in cessation becomes more powerful. Having cultivated *samatha* meditation, you can more easily enter into cessation for hours or days on end. Those are the two benefits.

Regarding the disadvantages, practicing *samatha* first takes longer because you need to first cultivate meditation based on a concept that has nothing to do with reality. True freedom from suffering comes only from understanding reality so you need to eventually change the object of your meditation. Focusing on concepts only suppresses mental defilements.

Practicing *samatha* first requires more, because in order to practice *samatha* you need to seclude yourself; you need to find a quiet place away from distraction and this is not always easy or even possible. *Samatha* meditation is ideally practiced in the wilderness, away from any kind of human contact or worldly disruption.

The third disadvantage of practicing *samatha* first is the potential for getting lost. As *samatha* deals with the realm of concepts, it is possible to become fully accomplished in profound states of peace and bliss without every attaining enlightenment. It is clear from the texts that such achievements are not sufficient for the attainment of enlightenment; they lead at most to rebirth in the Brahma worlds, as in the example of the Bodhisatta's two teachers.

Now, *samatha* is great; it is a wonderful thing. It quiets and calms your mind. It is not a matter of disliking it; we do not cultivate *samatha* meditation because we do not have the time or resources. We streamline the path because our time and resources are of the essence, and so we teach the most direct path to help the most people.

I do not think that I do not like *samatha*. When I was young I did practice it, sort of not knowing what it was, but it is very different from what I practice now. I do take issue with those who do not see the difference, those who think they are practicing *vipassanā* but are actually practicing *samatha*. It is tough because you cannot just tell someone that their practice is inferior to your own practice. Everyone is going to say that their practice is better, but it is an unavoidable reality that some meditation cannot lead to enlightenment because it is not focused on reality. It is like the story of the person who lost their contact lens in a dark room and went outside to look for it because the light was better. Even though *samatha* meditation might be easier and more pleasant, that is primarily *because* it is conceptually-based.

Value of *Jhāna*

Q: *Dear Yuttadhammo, how much value do you put on the practice of jhāna? Did not the Buddha advocate jhāna practice at least up to a point and does it not have a use in deepening vipassanā practice?*

A: The word *jhāna is* a highly debated one among modern Theravada Buddhists; not the meaning of the word, but its use and place in Buddhism. I think a lot of the controversy comes from the fact that we apply too much meaning to the word. The word *jhāna* means meditation or focusing or absorption; it means fixing the mind on an object, and in truth that definition applies to all meditation. This is why the Buddha said there is no wisdom without *jhāna* and there is no *jhāna* without wisdom; because true wisdom comes only through proper meditation practice and only those practices that lead to wisdom are proper to be called “meditation”.

The Theravada tradition categorizes meditation as being of two types. The first type is called *samatha* meditation, where one focuses on a single conceptual object created in the mind, for example, the Buddha or a color. The object of this type of meditation is not real and as a result it cannot bring wisdom or understanding about reality. It will bring great states of calm and so it is called *samatha* or “tranquility” meditation. This type of meditation can be useful as a precursor to *vipassanā* because it calms and strengthens the mind. It can also be used to attain

extraordinary mental powers of various sorts, but it does not lead directly to freedom from suffering.

To become free from suffering requires a different type of *jhāna* called *vipassana-jhāna*. *Vipassana-jhāna* means “seeing-clearly meditation”. When you practice *vipassanā* you also focus on an object, and so it can also be called *jhāna*; *y*our mind is focused and clearly aware of a single object. When we say to ourselves “rising”, we are clearly aware of the stomach rising; when we say “falling”, we are clearly aware of the falling. Through this practice, the mind also gives up the mental hindrances of liking, disliking, drowsiness, distraction, and doubt. It becomes fixed and focused, and so you can say it enters *jhāna*; it enters the *vipassana-jhāna*.

The real difference between *samatha* meditation and *vipassanā* meditation is that *samatha* takes a conceptual object and *vipassanā* meditation takes reality as an object - anything that arises in the present moment, whether it be in body, feelings, thoughts, states of mind, or sensory experience. A lot of the argument and debate about *jhāna* misses the point; worrying about terms and ideas can distract us from the goal, which is to understand ultimate reality and become free from suffering.

Samatha Jhāna, Vipassanā Jhāna

Q: *What is the difference between vipassanā jhānas and samatha jhānas? Is there an advantage of doing straight insight versus Samatha?*

A: Ultimately, the goal of Buddhism is to see the Four Noble Truths, which can only be seen through the practice of observing ultimate reality as it is. The ancient commentaries record different ways to go about it, but you must eventually focus on reality to see the truth. If you want to become a fully enlightened buddha, then you have your work cut out for you. If you want to become a private buddha, then you still have an incredible amount of work to do. If you want to become one of a buddha's chief disciples, you can look to our buddha's two chief disciples as examples: there was Mogallana, who took seven days to become an arahant, and Sariputta who took fourteen days to become an arahant.

Why did Sariputta take longer to become enlightened than Mogallana when he was the most excellent in wisdom apart from the Buddha? And why did both of them take longer than those who became enlightened from simply listening to the Buddha teach? It took Sariputta and

Mogallana longer because they had higher aspirations. Sariputta had exceptional aspirations, and it is amazing that in fourteen days he could accomplish what he did. He came to understand reality in a very profound way; the sutta states that he was able to observe realities appearing in sequence one by one. You do not need to follow these examples; it is totally up to the individual's aspirations.

Kondanna, who was the Buddha's first enlightened disciple, the first person to realize the truth of the Buddha's teaching, had made a wish in a past life that he should be the first person to become enlightened in a Buddha's dispensation. To cement his aspiration, he would give the first of everything as charity. He gave away the first rice when it was unripe, he gave away the first rice when it was ripe on the stalk, then he gave away the first harvest of rice, then he gave away the first threshing of the rice and then the first polishing of the rice and so on. He always gave away the first and then he made a determination that he should therefore come to see the truth first. His brother at the same time decided to give away the last of the rice, the last threshing, etc., and then he made a determination, to become the last person to realize the Buddha's teaching. The second brother became Subaddha in the time of our Buddha, the last person to learn the Buddha's teaching from the Buddha's own mouth.

You have to recognize that there are different ways of accomplishing the same goal. There is even a Sutta that is often quoted, in which some monks said, "We do not have magical powers and we have not attained the *arupa jhānas;* all we have are the *jhānas* required for attaining wisdom; we are *paññā-vimutti." Vimutti* means "liberated". The Buddha and later commentaries say there are two kinds of *vimutti*: *paññā-vimutti* and *ceto-vimutti*. Those who are *ceto-vimutti* practice *samatha* first and then continue on with *vipassanā. Paññā-vimutti* practice is only *vipassanā* and the *jhāna* that they attain is the bare minimum to see clearly. The commentaries are very clear on this and there is really no controversy in the texts, but in modern times some people do not accept this and they reinterpret what the Buddha said in new ways.

Here I will give my understanding about the *samatha* and *vipassanā jhānas* according to the commentaries.

There are in total three kinds of *jhāna*: the first kind of *jhāna* is *samatha-jhāna*, the second kind is *vipassana-jhāna,* and the third kind is *lokuttara-jhāna*.

To attain *samatha-jhāna*, called *ārammaṇūpanijjhāna* in the commentaries, one meditates on an *ārammaṇa*. *Ārammaṇa* means "object", but here specifically it is referring to a conceptual object, because only a conceptual object can be made the single object of one's focus over a period of time. There are forty standard objects of *samatha* meditation outlined in the texts: the ten *kasinas* (earth, water, fire, air, blue, yellow, red, white, enclosed space and consciousness); the ten contemplations on loathsomeness (a swollen corpse, a discolored corpse, a festering corpse, a fissured corpse, a mangled corpse, a dismembered corpse, a cut and dismembered corpse, a bleeding corpse, a worm-infested corpse, a skeleton); the ten *Anussati* (the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, morality, generosity, heavenly beings, death, the body, the breath, peace); the four *brahmavihāras* (kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity); the four *arūpa-kammaṭṭhānas* (limitless space, limitless consciousness, nothingness, neither-perception-nor-non-perception); *āhāre-paṭikūla-saññā* (perception of the repulsiveness of food); and *catu-dhātu-vavatthāna* (differentiating the four primary elements of earth, fire, water and air).

Focusing on any one of these forty, or something similar, leads to *samatha-jhāna*. They are all based on concepts, so meditating on these objects will not lead to insight directly. For example, you cannot expect to gain insight by thinking of the color white because "white" is a concept apart from the experience of seeing. The only way you can enter into a *samatha-jhāna* is if you focus on something that is stable, and if you focus on something that is stable, you will never see impermanence, suffering, and non-self. This is the distinction here.

Vipassana-jhāna is called by the commentaries *lakkhaṇūpanijjhāna,* which means meditation on the characteristics; *lakkhaṇa* means "characteristic", referring to the three characteristics of all real, arisen phenomena, impermanence, suffering and non-self. *Vipassana-jhāna* is based on reality, focusing on a momentary experience that arises and ceases. *Vipassanā* means to see clearly the nature of reality as being unsatisfying, stressful and not worth clinging to. When you see this you let go; when you let go you are free; and when you are free you can say, "I am free".

This *jhāna* is necessary to become enlightened because it involves the wisdom that leads to letting go; it is the only way one can enter into Nibbana.

Samatha meditation was taught and practiced before the time of the Buddha and yet there are Buddhist teachers who claim that it was discovered by the Buddha. It seems incredible to think that the sublime peace and tranquility described by ancient ascetics was something other than *jhāna*. Hindu gurus are experts in the *jhānas*. The Buddha truly did discover *vipassanā*, as can be seen by the absence of the three characteristics in the teachings of other religions, or even contradiction, especially regarding non-self.

Vipassanā leads to the third type of *jhāna*, *lokuttara-jhāna*. The monks who called themselves *paññā-vimutti* specified that they had never developed formless *jhāna (arūpa jhāna)*, which implies that they did attain *jhāna* with form (*rūpa-jhāna*). *Rūpa* here refers to the physical nature of the object of meditation. Some say that means even *paññā-vimutti* must practice *samatha jhāna*, but the real reason for specifying not attaining *arūpa jhāna* is because enlightenment itself involves a specific sort of *jhāna*, called *lokuttara-jhāna*. *Lokuttara-jhāna* are based on the level of *jhāna* used to attain them. If one enters into *Nibbāna* from the first *jhāna* this is the first *lokuttara-jhāna*. If one enters from the second *jhāna* it is the second *lokuttara-jhāna,* and so on.

Studying *Jhānas* and Mindfulness Before *Vipassanā*

Q: *Should the four foundations of mindfulness and the five jhāna factors of concentration and absorption be learned before vipassana meditation can be correctly used?*

A: A person may cultivate the five *jhāna* factors based on a conceptual object before cultivating *vipassanā*. This way of practice can be quite powerful, but it seems to generally take longer as the time spent focused on a conceptual object could have been used in cultivating *vipassanā* as well. Those who practice *vipassanā* from the beginning seem to attain results in a few weeks or at most a month, whereas those who practice tranquility first seem generally to take months or even years to get the same results, assuming they ever get around to *vipassanā* meditation at all; some people seem to get stuck on the calm and bliss of tranquility, never realizing that there is something higher than those states.

As for the four foundations of mindfulness, if the question is, "do you have to practice them before practicing *vipassanā* meditation?" then this is a misunderstanding about *vipassanā* meditation because *vipassanā* meditation is the practice of the four foundations of mindfulness; you practice the four foundations of mindfulness to see clearly (*vipassanā*). There are ways to use the four foundations of mindfulness to cultivate tranquility but mostly they are used to focus on and see clearly ultimate reality.

If the question is whether one has to *study* the four foundations before practicing, you do not have to study them in detail, but obviously you have to know about them because they are the practice itself. Knowing and understanding how to practice in regard to each of the four foundations, at least on a basic level, is essential. Without understanding what it is that you intend to practice, you cannot be expected to practice properly.

Knowledge of *Samatha Jhānas*

Q: *Would it be helpful to experience the jhānas, so that you can help a meditator to move beyond blocks?*

A: I think the underlying source of questions like this is that people really *want* to learn the *jhānas*. Just the thought of deep states of bliss and peace sound enticing, so there arises a sort

of desire for such states. When you more clearly see the nature of ultimate reality, such experiences become less enticing, as they are subject to the characteristics of impermanence, suffering, and non-self.

What you really need is an understanding of how reality works; the *jhānas* are just another part of reality. *Jhānas* are not anything mysterious or extraordinary, they are a state where the mind is secluded from the hindrances. They are just mindstates; they can last for extended periods of time, you can cultivate them in various ways, and you can use them to develop any number of magical powers like remembering past lives and so on, but the best way to understand them is to understand the reality that underlies all experiences. This is done through practicing the simple meditation of the four foundations of mindfulness to understand the building blocks of experience because once you understand what makes up experience, how experience works in terms of cause and effect, then there is nothing mysterious or hard to understand or really at all enticing about the *jhānas*.

So to directly answer your question, I do not think it would be all that helpful. Direct experience of how the mind works is far more useful than cultivating the *samatha jhānas* in order to help someone who experienced them and was having a block with them. Attachment to peaceful and tranquil states of mind is common, and that is quite difficult to train someone out of; it can be difficult to wean a person who has practiced *samatha* meditation intensively off of it especially if they are coming from a different religious tradition, for example if they had practiced meditation in the Hindu tradition which has different goals and ideas, or even Buddhist meditation traditions that emphasize the practice of tranquility and the states of calm that it produces, which can be sometimes difficult to let go of. Weaning someone off of their attachment to pleasant states of mind has nothing to do with knowledge of the *jhānas*, it has to do with knowledge of attachments and views: views about what is true happiness, views about what is self, and views about control and letting go; it has to do with views about impermanence and as the Buddha said, the *jhānas* and any kind of pleasant or even neutral feeling they bring is not permanent. Understanding these things does not require you to have attained the *jhānas* yourself.

Importance of *Metta*

Q: *How important is metta meditation? It is not something I have done often and I am not even certain I know how to do it correctly.*

A: If you want a really good discussion or explanation of all four of the Brahma viharas, I would recommend a book authored by Mahasi Sayadaw called 'Brahmavihara Dhamma', it is quite extensive and gives detailed instructions on how to develop loving kindness.

There are two ways of understanding *metta*: you can use it as a support for your meditation or you can use it to develop *samatha* (tranquility) meditation, which can lead to the first three *jhānas*. If you want to use *metta* to develop *samatha,* this should be done with a qualified teacher who can help lead you to the *jhānas*.

We often practice *metta* after *vipassanā* meditation, as a means of extending the wholesome states of mind cultivated during *vipassanā* practice. You can also practice *metta* before *vipassanā* practice to clear up anger or aversion. You can also practice it during *vipassanā* practice; when you are overwhelmed with anger you can use *metta* to help set your mind straight. *Metta* helps with straightening out your mind because anger and hate are based on misunderstanding; metta helps remind you that relating to people with aversion is wrong. *Metta* practice leads you to not just to give up the anger but to give up the delusion that says "this person is bad." When you send *metta* you develop the right view that it is proper for all beings to be happy, so you are not just developing love but you are also developing right view. It is similar to how focusing on the various parts of the body does not just lead to giving up bodily lust but it also leads to giving up the wrong view that this body is beautiful.

How do we Note During *Metta* Meditation?

Q: *How do we note during metta meditation?*

A: In the practice of *metta* meditation, the mantra is used to evoke friendliness, so you would say to yourself something like "May all beings be happy". In *vipassanā* meditation, the mantra is used to evoke a strong recognition (*thirasaññā*) of experiential reality; this process is sometimes referred to as "noting" the object of experience. Since *metta* meditation focuses on sentient

beings, which are conceptual, it is not really practical to combine “noting” concurrently with *metta* meditation. Technically, it is possible that when you are practicing *metta* meditation to switch to *vipassanā* meditation and focus on the four foundations of mindfulness, but this is not the point of metta meditation.

Mahasi Sayadaw talked about how when giving gifts some people will insist on noting “moving, placing” as they give something. He pointed out that such focus is not the purpose of giving; when someone gives a gift they should make a determination, for example, “May this gift be a support for my attainment of enlightenment.” At the time when you are making a determination it should not be with mindfulness of ultimate reality; it should be with full intention that the gift is for the benefit of the recipient and for the benefit of one’s own mind, that one may become free from suffering. Charity, like *metta* practice, is a conceptual practice. In theory, one should be always practicing *vipassanā* meditation, but in order to get to the level where such a state is possible, practices like *metta*, as well as charity and morality, are of great practical benefit and should be practiced independent of *vipassanā* meditation.

Other Useful Meditation Practices

Q: *You said in your Ask a Monk series, “for people caught up in lust it is good for them to contemplate the unpleasant aspects of the body.” What is the proper way to do that?*

A: I did mention this, and I think I mentioned as well that for people caught up in anger it is good to practice friendliness (*mettā*). Both belong to a set of four meditations called the *caturārakkha kammaṭṭhānā*. *Ārakkha* means “guard”, so these four meditations are meant to guard the person's mind, or they are something that protects you during the time that you are practicing *vipassanā* meditation to see clearly; they are a sort of protection that will help keep the mind in a condition where it is able to see clearly, stopping it from falling into great states of lust, anger and so on.

The four *kammaṭṭhāna* (meditations) are: mindfulness of the Buddha, mindfulness of the absence of beauty in the body; friendliness, and death. Each has different qualities and, although none of them are necessary to attain enlightenment, they can be of practical value in so are recommended as generally supportive meditation practices as a compliment to the practice of *vipassanā* meditation.

Mindfulness of the Buddha is most practical for Buddhists, people who consider the Buddha and his teachings as their guide, as a means of bolstering our courage to undertake the difficult path towards purity and enlightenment. We practice recollecting the Buddha as an example to us, someone who was the perfect teacher, free from defilement and delusion, perfect in knowledge and conduct.

We reflect on the characteristics of the Buddha, for instance that he had great wisdom. We hear his teachings and gain great faith, reaffirming in our minds that yes indeed, he is one who had great wisdom, and so we should follow his teachings because they will certainly lead to the result he proclaims.

We reflect on the great purity of the Buddha; both he and his teachings are incredibly pure, free of dogma or superstition. The Buddha was pure in that he simply gave something to the world that was of use to all beings, as opposed to looking for students or trying to become famous.

We reflect on his great compassion, deciding to teach for the whole of his enlightened life; he could have sat in the forest and meditated and passed away undisturbed, but when he was asked to teach he gave up his own peaceful abiding to bring peace to others.

There are many qualities of the Buddha that we recite and reflect upon and, although this is obviously something that is most useful for Buddhists, I would encourage everyone to study about the qualities of the Buddha. One simple way to do this is to recite the Pali verse recollecting his virtues and consider each one individually; so we say *vijjācaraṇasampanno*, which means “endowed with knowledge and conduct”, and reflect on the Buddha’s greatness of knowledge and conduct, and so on.

The second meditation is the one you asked about, mindfulness of the unpleasant or literally “not-beautiful” nature of the body. The view that the body is something beautiful is wrong; there's nothing intrinsically beautiful about the body. It could be argued that there is nothing intrinsically ugly about the body either but in comparison the perception of the body as beautiful is generally due to not paying close attention to reality, whereas the perception of the body as ugly is generally a result of paying attention. If you compare the body to gold or

diamonds, or a flower, the human body isn't very high on any objective scale of beauty; this is made clear by the practice of reviewing the parts of the body.

Starting with the hair on your head, its nature is like grass that has been planted in this skull and if you do not wash it smells and looks repulsive. Focusing your attention on hair as a meditation object, you quickly come to see that hair is not the attractive thing we ordinarily perceive it as. We often perceive a person's hair as beautiful, but if a strand of hair falls into our food we might become nauseous. When hair is cut off it looks unappealing in clumps on the floor; people who keep their hair after cutting it are often met with revulsion.

We go through all the various parts of the body as a reflection: head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, blood, bones, bone marrow, feces, urine, liver, spleen, heart, and so on. Traditionally, one would learn and recite the Pali names for each: *kesā, lomā, nakhā, dantā, taco, maṃsaṃ, nhāru, aṭṭhi, aṭṭhimiñjaṃ,* etc., through all thirty-two parts of the body, then break them up into groups or reflect on them individually, saying *kesa, kesa, kesa,* and just repeat that word over and over, focusing on the concept of head hair in much the same way as we focus on experience in *vipassanā* meditation, except in this meditation one focuses on a concept, the concept of head hair. You do not have to convince yourself that the body is loathsome, you just reflect mindfully about the parts of the body and slowly the delusion of beauty fades as you become more familiar with the true nature of the body. In some cases it can happen that one does become repulsed as a result of this sort of practice, so it is best practiced by one who has great lust for physical beauty, to help free them of that misperception.

The third meditation is friendliness, *mettā*, which is often used as a means of dedicating the goodness gained through cultivating mindfulness to those we care for. After a formal meditation session, you can channel the strength and clarity of mind gained from meditation to express appreciation for all beings and to commit yourself to overcoming any conflict you might have with others. This practice can be of great benefit to the practice of *vipassanā* meditation, helping to straighten out the crookedness we have in our minds. There are many ways to practice *mettā*. You can extend good will consecutively in terms of proximity, wishing first for your parents to be happy, then for relatives, family, people nearby, people in your city, country, the whole world, and finally the whole universe. Even a few minutes of this practice after finishing

with *vipassanā* meditation is useful for overcoming anger, strengthening relationships with others, and straightening the mind.

The fourth meditation is mindfulness of death, which is useful for cultivating a sense of urgency, reminding us that we cannot just go on with our lives as though there were no tomorrow; eventually there comes a day of reckoning when our physical body dies. At the time of one's death, they say your whole life flashes before your eyes, and you will cling to whatever has the strongest emotional hold on your mind, leading you to be born again based on that experience. If it is a bad experience, your next life will be unpleasant. Remembering this possibility is an important practice to stop us from being negligent.

There are many ways to cultivate mindfulness of death. The traditional method is to simply say to yourself something like "life is uncertain, death is certain" or "all beings have to die and I too will have to die one day." There is a story of the Bodhisatta teaching his whole family mindfulness of death, so they were never complacent and when his son died, no one in the family was consumed by suffering at the loss.

You can and should make use of all of these meditations from time to time as appropriate. They are all beneficial and can be used together with *vipassanā* meditation to great benefit.

Love and Compassion

Q: *What is the difference between metta and compassion?*

A: *Mettā* and *karuṇā* are like two sides of the same coin. *Mettā* means "friendliness". It comes from the word *mitta*, meaning "a friend"; you strengthen the 'I' and it becomes an 'E' and so you get *mettā*, "the state of being a friend". *Mettā* refers to the inclination that beings should be happy, leading to act, speak and think in ways that promote the happiness of others. *Karuṇā*, compassion, is the complimentary wish for beings to not suffer; it leads one to act, speak, and think in ways that help free other beings from suffering.

Neither *mettā* nor *karuṇā* themselves refer to actions; they are states of mind that will inform your actions, helping to bring about positive results. One cultivates *mettā* by repeating a mantra like "May all beings be happy" and the result will be an inclination to bring happiness and

peace to others. With *karuṇā*, the mantra is something like “May all beings be free from suffering”, which will result in an inclination to work to relieve suffering.

In the end, both are working towards the same goal, as true happiness is freedom from suffering, they are one in the same. But the state of mind is different: friendliness is an inclination towards positive results and compassion is an inclination away from negative results. In brief, *karuṇā* is the inclination to take away suffering, and *metta* is the inclination to bestow happiness.

Sublime Abiding

***Q**: As I meditate I first want to develop a context of equanimity and loving kindness with respect to my thoughts and emotions as they arise. We live in a culture of ‘attack or be attacked’. Can you do a short guided meditation on calm abiding please?*

A: Calm abiding or meditations on altruistic emotions like friendliness can be very useful as companions to *vipassanā* meditation. I would not recommend to practice developing loving kindness or equanimity alone, because that can lead to avoiding the emotions they are meant to counter. When you are angry and pretend that you love everyone, it is really not a way of gaining sincere friendliness or appreciation of the suffering that other beings are going through.

The best way to develop friendliness, compassion, appreciation and equanimity is together with *vipassanā* meditation; I would caution against the view that you need to develop them before you can adequately develop insight meditation. You should examine the emotions that are causing you to think that way; maybe you have states of great anger or hatred in your mind that you are trying to shy away from, or maybe there are states of attachment to the peace and the happiness, wanting to feel love and equanimity. In the end you have to put aside such partiality and try to face your negative and positive emotions with equal objectivity. When you feel angry, you have to learn about anger; the best way to do away with it is to understand it. When you want to feel love or peace, or when you do not like the ups and downs of the mind - where the mind is liking-disliking-liking-disliking and you wish you could be equanimous - you have to examine that wanting for equanimity, and the aversion towards the turbulence in the mind. During the practice of *vipassanā* meditation you can switch to friendliness or compassion when overwhelming emotions arise. When you feel hatred or rage towards other beings, that is

an appropriate time to develop friendliness or compassion as a means of weakening the emotion, redirecting the mind towards wholesome mind states.

A simple exercise in friendliness is to first focus on yourself and make an explicit wish that you may be happy and free from suffering: “May I be happy.” Next, make the same wish towards others, starting with those who are closest to you. It can be the people who are in closest physical proximity to you or those who are closest to you emotionally. This is because either group is the easiest to send thoughts of friendliness to. Say to yourself, “May they be happy, may they find peace.” Then, gradually do this for beings who are further and further away from you, either physically or emotionally.

Physically you can start with beings in the same building, then those in the same city, country, and finally all beings in the entire world. You can also specify humans first, then do the same things for animals, angels, ghosts, etc.

Emotionally, after those who are close to you, focus on those who you do not have either positive or negative feelings towards, and finally focus on those who you do have negative feelings towards, or who have negative feelings towards you. If you are not able to send love to any group, you can return to focus on the previous group until you are stronger.

Compassion is practiced in the same way as friendliness, except where friendliness is the wish for beings to be happy, compassion is wishing for them to be free from suffering. Compassion is useful for when you feel sorry for someone or sad about the suffering of others. It is a way of calming your mind so that you are not incapacitated by your sadness, so you can be a grounded support for those are in trouble.

Appreciation (*muditā*) is appreciation for the attainments of other beings. This is often cultivated in ordinary life, using the expression “*sādhu!*”, which means “Good!”. When we tell someone that we are happy for them, or offer congratulations, this is *muditā*. It is helpful in giving up jealousy and resentment, helping let go of comparing oneself with others, wishing for the things they have or not wanting them to get the things that we have. Appreciation is another important quality of mind that brings peace of mind and helps us to practice meditation.

As for equanimity, there are two kinds: equanimity towards beings and equanimity towards experiences. In *vipassanā* meditation we practice cultivating equanimity towards

experiences. In the context of the other three qualities discussed here, the related practice is cultivating equanimity towards beings, which involves an acknowledgement of karma. When you see beings suffering or benefitting and you remind yourself, “they are going according to their karma”, this is cultivating equanimity. It is a useful practice to do away with anger or sadness in the face of perceived injustice related to politics or economics; when you see the disparity between the very rich and very poor and you feel angry, reminding yourself, “All beings go according to their karma” can help you keep a level head, so you are not consumed by negative emotions.

When we see beings in great states of loss, suffering or in great states of power, influence and affluence, we can remind ourselves that if these people in the state of great affluence continue to repress those who are impoverished then they themselves will be doomed to attain the same state of poverty in the future. It is a cycle of cause and effect where inevitably our destiny reflects our actions. When you think like this you do away with any sense of unfairness. You are able to understand that life is ultimately fair and there is no need to get angry at those who oppress others, as they are going to have to suffer the same fate in the future, and the reason why oppressed beings suffer in the present is because they have done it to others in the past. Reflecting in this way brings peace of mind and so it too is a support for *vipassanā* meditation.

Practicing *vipassanā* meditation is likewise the best support for developing all four states of mind; in *vipassanā* meditation, one becomes equanimous towards all things as perceptions of beings become secondary to the primary perspective of reality as moments of experience arising and ceasing. As a result you understand the experiences of other beings; when they are suffering you can appreciate what they are going through; even when they are angry or upset or engaged in immoral acts, you can understand them and you can feel pity for them, that they are stuck in a cycle of karma that they cannot break free from, and rather than blame the individual, you understand the cause to be the development of habitual tendencies through ignorance, through simply not knowing what they are doing.

When beings are suffering you can empathize with them, when beings are prosperous you do not feel jealous, you appreciate the nature of good qualities because you know that they lead to happiness. You are happy and content yourself so you do not feel the need to compare yourself to others and ultimately see other beings with equanimity, not preferring to be with this

person or that person. You accept reality for what it is and you realize that partiality is not of any use or benefit, as it does not lead to real happiness.

If you want to develop a meditation based on loving kindness or equanimity, you should formulate as explained and cultivate the associated inclinations according to your own situation. As mentioned, it can be based on those who are in physical or emotional proximity, but it is something that should come naturally, and something that you should develop in tandem with *vipassanā* meditation. I would not really recommend spending too much of your time in terms of developing intensive meditation in this area, simply because it is time consuming and you would be much better served by training in *vipassanā* meditation and when an emotion becomes overwhelming, use these practices as a support for your main meditation practice.

Glossary

adhimokkha - Resolve. Experience of confidence, self-assurance, or thinking oneself has obtained a supramundane state of being

Ādīnava Ñāṇa - knowledge of the disadvantages of clinging

āhāre-paṭikūla-saññā - perception of the repulsiveness of food

anāgāmi - non-returner, is the third of the four stages of the supramundane path

ānāpānasati - mindfulness of the in-breaths and the out-breaths (technically *samatha* meditation)

anatta - 'not-self', non-ego, egolessness, impersonality, is the last of the three characteristics of existence

Aṅguttara Nikāya - The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha

anicca - 'impermanent', 'impermanence' is the first of the three characteristics of existence

Anuloma Ñāṇa - means a mind that “goes with the grain” of truth as opposed to going against the grain. It means being finally in tune with the way things are.

anussati - means "recollection," "contemplation," "remembrance," "meditation", and "mindfulness". It refers to specific Buddhist meditational or devotional practices, such as recollecting the sublime qualities of the Buddha, which lead to mental tranquility and abiding joy.

Arahant - a being who has attained the fourth stage of enlightenment; a worthy one, has eliminated all defilements and is fully liberated.

ārammaṇa - object

ārammaṇūpanijjhāna - it is referring to a conceptual object/ meditation on the sense-objects

arupa jhāna - immaterial jhana

arūpa-kammaṭṭhānas - immaterial meditation subjects: limitless space, limitless consciousness, nothingness, neither-perception-nor-non-perception

athirasanna - weak perception

aṭṭhi - bones

aṭṭhimiñjaṃ - bone marrow

atta - self

bhava - being or becoming

Bhaya Ñāṇa - knowledge of danger or fearsomeness

bhūmi - earth

catudhātuvavatthāna - analysis of the four elements - earth, water, air, fire

caturārakkha - four meditation type that “guard” the person's mind - mindfulness of the Buddha, mindfulness of the absence of beauty in the body; friendliness, and death

ceto-vimutti - those who practice *samatha* first and then continue on with *vipassanā*

chanda - interest, desire to act

citta - mind, consciousness

citta viveka - solitude of mind is called

dantā - teeth

Dhamma - a reality, can also refer to the teachings expounded by the Buddha

dukkha - commonly translated as suffering, anxiety, stress, or unsatisfactoriness. It is the first of the Four Noble Truths and one of the three marks of existence.

ehipassiko - means it lets you “come and see” for yourself

esa maggo visuddhiyā - this is the path to purification

Five Precepts - not to kill, not to steal, not to cheat, not to lie and not to take drugs and alcohol

gacchāmī - walking

gacchanto vā gacchāmī ti pajānāti - when walking, one knows fully 'I am walking"

Gotrabhū Ñāṇa - change of lineage means changing one's state of mind from being an ordinary human being to being one who has realized the ultimate truth.

iddhipāda - roads to power and mastery. They are the four means by which to succeed in any endeavor, meditation included.

jānāti - one knows

jhāna - means meditation or focusing or absorption; it means fixing the mind on an object, and in truth that definition applies to all meditation

Karma - volitional action, considered particularly as a moral force capable of producing results that correspond to the ethical quality of the action; thus good karma (Pali: kamma) produces happiness, and bad karma produces suffering for the being taking action

karuṇā - compassion, is the complimentary wish for beings to not suffer

kasiṇa - totality

kāya viveka - seclusion of the body

kesā - head hair

lakkhaṇa - means "characteristic", referring to the three characteristics of all real, arisen phenomena, impermanence, suffering and non-self

lakkhaṇūpanijjhāna - means meditation on the characteristics

lokuttara-jhāna - enlightenment itself involves this sort of *jhāna*

lomā - body hair

kammaṭṭhāna - meditations

Magga Ñāṇa - path knowledge; attainment of the path

Majjhima Nikāya - middle-length discourses of the Buddha, is the second of the five nikayas (collections) of the Sutta Pitaka

maṃsaṃ - flesh

metta - friendliness

mitta - friend

muditā - appreciative joy; appreciation for the attainments of other beings

Muñcitukamyatā Ñāṇa - knowledge of desire for release or freedom

nakhā - nails

Nāmarupa Pariccheda Ñāṇa - insight into the separation between body and mind

ñāṇa - knowledge or insight

natthi ragasamo aggi - there is no fire like lust

nhāru - blood

Nibbidā Ñāṇa - knowledge of disenchantment

nicca - stability or permanency

nikanti - desire

obhāsa - illumination

Pacala¯Sutta - records Moggallāna's meditation struggle with nodding off or sleepiness

Pacalāyamāna Sutta - ways of dealing with drowsiness

Paccavekkhana Ñāṇa - Knowledge of reflection. After emerging from the realization of Nibbāna, one reflects on the results, seeing what has changed in the mind as a result of that realizing.

Paccaya Pariggaha Ñāṇa - Knowledge of cause and effect. Seeing the nature of the physical and mental phenomena and how they work together based on cause and effect.

paggaha - exertion

paññā - wisdom of insight

paññā-vimutti - liberated by wisdom

passaddhi - tranquility

passanā - seeing

paṭhavī - earth element

Paṭisaṅkhā Ñāṇa - knowledge of going over everything again

patissatimattāya - with just a state of remembrance

Phala Ñāṇa - Attainment of Fruition

pilapana - wobbling

pīti - rapture

Precepts - moral rules one takes

rūpa - matter or body

rūpa-jhāna - fine material jhana

Sabbāsava Sutta - sutta that describes the guarding of one's faculties

sādhu - good

sakadāgāmi - once-returner; second stage of enlightenment

samādhi - focus

samatha - “tranquility” meditation designed to calm your mind

samatha-jhāna - To attain *samatha-jhāna*, called *ārammaṇūpanijjhāna* in the commentaries, one meditates on an *ārammaṇa*. *Ārammaṇa* means “object”, but here specifically it is referring to a conceptual object, because only a conceptual object can be made the single object of one’s focus over a period of time.

Sammasana Ñāṇa - knowledge of comprehension

samosa - forgetfulness

samvara - the guarding of one’s faculties

saṃvarā pahātabbā - mental corruptions that should be removed by guarding

saññā - perception

Sangha - those who became enlightened by practicing the teaching and have passed on the teaching up to the present day

Saṅkhārupekkhā Ñāṇa - knowledge of equanimity

sati - to remember, recollect or remind oneself of something

satipaṭṭhāna - mindfulness practice

Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta - sutta describing mindfulness practice

sobhanacetasikā - a beautiful or a wholesome mindstate

sotāpanna - the first type of enlightened being; simply having an experience of nibbāna once means you've irreversibly entered the “stream” leading to full liberation. The Buddha said such a person will only be born a maximum of seven more lifetimes.

sotāpatti-magga - realization of the path of *Sotāpanna*

sotāpatti-phala - fruition of *Sotāpanna*

sukha - happiness or satisfaction

taco - skin

thira - firm, strong or fortified

thirasaññā - strong recognition

Three Marks of Existence - impermanence, suffering and non-self

Udayabbaya Ñāṇa - knowledge of arising and ceasing

upaṭṭhāna - attention

upekkhā - equanimity

vayo dhatu - air element; element of motion

vi - implies that it is in a special or exceptional way

vibhajja - split part

vibhajjavādi - splitting it up into its constituent parts; dissecting

vijjācaraṇasampanno - endowed with knowledge and conduct

vīmaṃsā - the ability to consider and adjust

vimutti - liberated

vinodanā pahātabbā - mental corruptions that should be removed by avoiding

vipassanā-bhāvanā - *vipassanā* meditation

vipassanā - seeing clearly

vipassana-jhāna - seeing-clearly meditation

viriya - effort

visayabhimukhabhava - not confronting