CONTEMPLATIONS ON THE SEVEN FACTORS OF AWAKENING

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DEDICATION

I wish to express gratitude to all my Teachers,
my parents and all those who have helped in this work;
especially to the Kataññutā group of Malaysia,
Singapore and Australia, for bringing it into production.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is based on a series of talks on the Seven Factors of Awakening given at Bodhinyanarama Monastery in New Zealand during the Rains Retreat in 2007. My intention is to give some basic information about the Factors based upon the teachings in the Pali Canon, the scriptures of the Theravada school of Buddhism, to readers ranging from complete beginners to experienced meditators, including guidance on how to develop these important spiritual qualities. Thus this is a series of meditative contemplations to help support a direct experience of the Factors. I have therefore tended to emphasize certain aspects of particular Factors, for example, acknowledging natural energy rather than only will-power, making Awakening more accessible rather than explaining the 'higher stages', etc. I have included a suggested meditation at the beginning of each chapter to encourage a meditative enquiry. The book is by no means a definitive presentation of this theme. I suggest that those interested in more information on these themes should consult the Pali Canon directly, or the other books listed in the bibliography.

The Seven Factors of Awakening (in Pali, *bojjhaṇgā*) are one of the categories of spiritual qualities frequently mentioned by the Buddha as very beneficial for spiritual development. In the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*

(SN V,74) of the Pali Canon it is stated that if the Seven Factors of Awakening are developed and cultivated, they fulfil knowledge and liberation. However, the Buddha qualifies this by saying that their development must be based upon 'seclusion, dispassion, cessation, maturing in relinquishing.' At SN V 93 they are referred to as 'non-obstructions, non-hindrances and non-defilements of the mind'. In the same discourse they are stated to be fulfilled by the development of the Four Attendings with Mindfulness. It is helpful to note that one of the categories in the development of mindfulness is the Seven Factors of Awakening. Thus the development of each of these two areas of spiritual practice feeds back into the other.

There are many other references to the Factors throughout the Buddha's teachings. The whole of chapter 46 of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (*Bojjhaṇgāsaṃyutta*, Book V, discourses 63-140) is devoted to the Seven Factors of Awakening. A number of the Factors are also found in other categories of the Buddha's teaching. For example, Mindfulness, Energy and Concentration, together with Faith and Wisdom, comprise the Five Faculties and Five Powers; and Energy as Right Effort, with Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, forms the concentration (*samādhi)* group of the qualities of the Noble Eightfold Path.

I would like to thank the transcribers who spent many hours on these talks, as well as my diligent editor and layout manager. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. The references are by Pali Text Society Pali version by volume and page, or discourse (*sutta*) number.

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR MEDITATION

There are many meditation subjects in the Buddha's teachings. Chapters III to XI of the *Visuddhimagga (The Path of Perfection*), a great treatise on the teachings, mention forty different ones. The most common subject is attending to breathing, to which I will refer in these meditation exercises. A number of the other subjects are also mentioned in the chapter on Mindfulness. Meditation exercises can in theory be practised at any time, anywhere and in any posture. However, many people find it helpful, at least initially, to practise at regular intervals in a quiet and undisturbed place and a comfortable sitting position, either in a chair or on the floor, perhaps with the support of a cushion. You can practise the meditations and each section of the instructions given here for as long as seems suitable, provided you remain reasonably comfortable while doing so.

Take up a reasonably comfortable sitting position, keeping the back upright but not tense. Begin by bringing attention to the body as it sits, sensing into the body, becoming aware of the sensations which make up our direct experience of body. Much of the time most of us are inside our heads, so this is a good exercise to help ground ourselves in the direct experience of physicality. It also helps us to tune in to the actual physical conditions with which we are sitting.

What is the general bodily sensation? Is the body heavy or light, is it relaxed or tense? As you move attention slowly down the body from the top of the head, are there any places where there is some strong or obvious sensation? They may be on the surface of the skin such as clothes touching, or perhaps tightness or tension in the muscles or joints. As much as possible, we try to relax or relieve any discomfort.

Next we bring attention to the sensation of natural breathing wherever it is most obvious: at the nostrils, or perhaps the chest or abdomen rising and falling. How do we connect with that breathing process? Is it clear and obvious, or faint and distant? At least the breathing process is continuous, and thus it is a very reliable and consistent object on which to settle attention. We take this sensation of natural breathing as the main focus for attention, the main point of reference. When we notice our attention wandering, we gently and patiently turn the attention back to the sensation of breathing once again.

It may be helpful to observe the condition of the mind at any particular time. What is the degree of wakefulness, clarity or alertness of mind? What is the degree of calmness or busyness of mind? Once we are clear what the condition of the mind is, we can adjust our relationship to the meditation subject accordingly. Thus if the mind is not very alert it may be useful to give special attention to the inhalation (which is generally more energizing), or to the very beginnings and endings of the inhalation and exhalation. If the mind is quite busy it may be useful either to give it some 'space' to wind down by just observing thoughts rather than engaging with them, or perhaps follow the breath very closely to reduce the tendency to distraction. The main point is that while we use the breathing process as the main focus of attention, we can adjust the way we focus in relation to the prevailing mental condition, and see what is most useful for increasing clarity and calmness of mind.

Very simply, increased clarity of mind (with supportive insight) is developed through increased mindfulness or awareness of what is happening in the body and the mind (*Vipassanā* or Insight Meditation). Increased calmness of mind is developed through increased concentration or persistent focusing of attention on the meditation object (*Samatha* or Calm Meditation).

For further details, see *Introduction to Insight Meditation* (listed in the Bibliography).

1 MINDFULNESS

MEDITATION

Take up a reasonably comfortable sitting position, keeping the back upright but not tense. Begin by bringing attention to the body as it sits, sensing into the body, becoming aware of the sensations which make up our direct experience of body.

Next we bring attention to the sensation of natural breathing, observing the inhalation and exhalation directly as they occur.

Now for a moment return attention to the bodily sensations. What is the feeling tone associated with those sensations? Is it pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, that is, neither pleasant nor unpleasant?

Then go back to focussing attention on the breathing once again.

Now, bring attention for a moment to the condition of the mind as it is right now. What is the degree of clarity, wakefulness or alertness of mind? What is the degree of busyness or quietness of mind? Is there some specific activity of mind which is obvious, such as thoughts about the future or memories of the past?

Then go back to focusing attention on the breathing once again.

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THE FOUR ATTENDINGS WITH MINDFULNESS

The first of the Seven Factors of Awakening is mindfulness. The topic of mindfulness is outlined in detail in two scriptures on the 'Attendings with Mindfulness.'[1] In these scriptures the Buddha is quoted as saying that this practice is the 'direct path' to awakening, and as adding that awakening could happen within as little as seven days! Of course, it is stated that one should practise deeply and directly, contemplating with persevering diligence, clearly knowing and mindful, free of worldly desires and discontent. This is not usually the kind of mindfulness with which most of us are familiar.

One author coined the phrase that the practice of mindfulness is the 'Heart of Buddhist Meditation'. Generally, mindfulness practice and concentration are the two main pillars of Buddhist meditation. Some of the scriptures describe exercises for developing concentration, but the two scriptures referred to above give a very detailed presentation of the practice of developing mindfulness, which has become very much emphasized in meditation practice, especially insight meditation or *vipassanā*.

The four areas of our experience for developing mindfulness are the body, feeling tones, conditions of mind and dhammas, or specific mental phenomena. In practice we could take any one of these four areas, such as developing body awareness, and that could lead us to awakening. All four are not actually necessary. However, we may have to make a general study of all of them in order to discover the theme with which we are most comfortable; and even if we do attain some 'success' with developing mindfulness on one particular theme, it can still be helpful to have a more complete overview and practise in a broader context by developing awareness of all four themes. And even if we do have some success with one theme,

1 Digha Nikāya (DN) 22 and Majjhima Nikāya (MN) 10. For a very thorough explanation, see Analayo, Satipatthāna: The Direct Path to Realization (Windhorse Publications, 2004), whom I have followed in translating 'satipatthāna as 'attending with mindfulness' (p.29).

it may only take us so far. It is implied in the scriptures that only development of mindfuIness on all four themes leads to higher realization.[2] At the very least, the developing of mindfulness on all four themes provides a good, rounded balance in our life, as well as in our spiritual practice.

In my view it's not so difficult to have some sort of insight, even quite penetrating insights, into, say, the body or conditions of mind, but unless these insights are developed in the broader context of our whole life experience, they don't last very long or are not very complete, authentic or substantial. Having a broader repertoire of meditation practices or exercises helps us to integrate these insights and allows them to penetrate wider areas of our life. For example, one of the primary insights is into impermanence. Someone can have quite deep insight into impermanence, into the changing body or changing conditions of mind, for example. However, the insight often stays related only to that limited experience – I know my mind is changing, or I know my body is changing, but this insight does not extend much deeper into my whole life. It is only a memory or abstract reflection for that time, that place, that experience.

I remember meeting a monk in Thailand who had been on a meditation retreat and had a truly deep insight into the changing of the body, which had really inspired him. He held up his hand and said, 'I've really got to understand this before I die.' He had had a moment of insight, but wanted to deepen it, I suppose to full awakening, before he died. I was quite impressed with that at first, but then I began to reflect on it and realized that while he had indeed had an insight, he was now chasing that insight rather than putting energy into cultivating the practice. He wanted to see the body really clearly as he had done before, but my experience over the years has been that this type of event never happens again in the same way. We have an insight, and there is clarity of mind and some wisdom develops, but this is just like seeing in one direction, and it

2 Analayo, p.22.

will never happen like that again because the mind is changing. We have had that initial insight, but our practice really needs deepening or broadening. If we are still looking to replicate the insight, is that really impermanence? Even that insight is impermanent.

I think the real point of this development of mindfulness is putting our energy back into the whole process of developing clearer seeing and more awareness in general, rather than just achieving a specific insight. I prefer to use the word 'awareness' rather than 'mindfulness', which was first used in this sense in the Victorian era. It was a useful word then and maybe it is still useful even today, because it is not too ordinary and it explains the whole process quite well in one word – keeping in mind or heedfulness. But I personally prefer the word 'awareness', because it is one with which we're all familiar – we're aware of the word 'awareness'! We can also appreciate that there are different degrees of awareness.

AWARENESS OF BODY

So in this training, this development of awareness, if we have practised the meditation given at the beginning of this chapter, we have already developed some awareness of the body. I know my knee is getting sore or the cushion is getting hard. We are aware to a certain degree of the bodily sensations, but we can also put energy into developing that awareness of the body in a more sensitive and refined way. Not only is this an exercise in variety and refinement, noticing more sensations and more subtle sensations, but it also involves noticing what is common to all these sensations.

When we just refer to the body, we usually think of a concept: my body. I can close my eyes and think, 'It looks like this, it's short', and so on. But going into the experience of sensation is something different, sometimes very different. I remember that once, after sitting for a ceremony for a couple of hours, my back began to ache. But I couldn't get up and walk away, I couldn't escape because I was

front-stage, so I just had to be with that backache. I could recognize this kind of backache as familiar, but it was different too, especially because I was just trying to be present with it, rather than resist it or become angry with it. Just being with it was actually very peaceful. It wasn't pleasant, but it was peaceful just to be with that sensation.

We can carry out this exercise formally by developing awareness of bodily sensations. The body is the general topic, but we know the body by sensation, by the sense of touch. We experience it by tactile sensation, hot and cold: for example – I went outside and it was cold, I came in here and it was hot. When we first sit down the cushion is soft, but after an hour or so it gets hard. This is the direct experience of the body. And there are a great variety of sensations. As I mentioned earlier, we can be aware not only of general bodily sensations, but perhaps also of some specific sensations. My back is all right, but my neck may be a bit sore. Some parts of the body may be reasonably comfortable and some not so comfortable. Being able to develop this exercise gives us the ability to go into the direct experience in all its dimensions. We all have our familiar habitual experiences. If I were to ask how you experience the body, you would probably bring to mind a familiar sensation. My familiar sensation is my knee – 'Oh yes, it must be Ajahn Tiradhammo because it's that same knee problem.' But who had that experience of backache? I didn't know that guy. That was not the same familiar sensation of body to which I relate to as being myself. On the one hand this can be quite liberating. When we begin to experience different dimensions of the body, we don't have to hang on to its same old habits. Sometimes, though, we just take on new habitual patterns of body. But the whole point is to be able to see the body as it really is. That's the ultimate point of mindfulness practice.

So although we may know the body to a certain degree, we may not really understand it as it actually is. For example, a common experience in meditation is that while most people are very familiar

with their comfortable body, when it starts to become uncomfortable they have resistance rising. They don't want to know that body; they want to know the comfortable body, not the uncomfortable one. But we are only able to develop awareness of the body fully through being aware of its changing aspects and facets, not just when it's comfortable. The uncomfortable aspects are perhaps the ones that need the most investigation and exploring, because those are the ones we're resisting. I didn't want to sense my aching back. My first choice would have been to get up, stretch my back and lie down somewhere, but I couldn't, so I had to sit there with the unpleasant back. And although it wasn't pleasant, it was peaceful because I could open up to it, be with it.

There are various exercises with regard to this body awareness. The very first exercise in the scriptures about developing the attendings with mindfulness is breathing meditation. One brings awareness to the breathing process. One is aware when the breath is long or short, deep or shallow. Quite a significant amount of the scriptural explanation is devoted to breathing. Something as simple as breathing, which we do all the time, could be a very important source of insight. It's actually breathing which keeps us alive, it's the most immediate nutriment of our life. We can go without food or water for a while, but we can't go without breath for five minutes.

There are also other exercises on the awareness of body, for example, awareness of how it moves – walking, standing, sitting, lying down, dressing, eating, drinking, going to the toilet, falling asleep, waking up, talking, etc. Here the body is being displayed or expressed in different ways. Then there are more detailed or specialized exercises in developing awareness of the body. The first such exercise is about what are traditionally called the thirty-two parts of the body. Its purpose is to develop more awareness of the body in a different context, by allowing it to be seen more clearly. Normally we have our own particular preferences when we look at a body. I guess most

people look at faces, and maybe that's our main reference for the body, but of course there's a lot more to the body than that. This exercise of examining the thirty-two parts of the body, although not very popular in the West, is one of the main meditation themes in southeast Asia. Of course, to be able to develop it one needs to study these thirty-two different parts, learn about them and be able to remember them. Some of them are internal organs, others are the external parts of the body; some are the fluids in the body, which relates to the next topic of the four elemental qualities. The purpose of the exercise is the development of awareness, providing a much broader overview of what we take to be the body.

If thirty-two parts are too much, some people just use the first five – hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin. At first this can seem a bit abstract, but the point is to use our conceptual faculties to bring up these aspects of body, and then go more deeply into them, experience them more directly. If we have an image of, say, teeth, and we're not looking in a mirror, we have to think, 'teeth are like this'. But by meditating on them or contemplating them at a deeper level, we have a different experience of them. When I was in Switzerland I used to do my 'teeth-brushing meditation' in my room after breakfast. It was a very good opportunity, because here was a situation where I could collect myself on this simple everyday act. I knew about these thirty-two parts of the body and that teeth were one of the parts, but I'd never really developed the exercise. But here was an opportunity early in the morning while brushing my teeth. It's a simple act which we do several times every day, so it's a good opportunity for meditation. It only took five or ten minutes, not a real knee-cruncher of a meditation, but it was sometimes very insightful to be aware of this theme of teeth. We may not usually notice them very often (until we have to go to the dentist, and then there may be rather too much emphasis on them!) Through becoming more aware of teeth, I sometimes had

some quite interesting insights. One was maybe more of a fantasy: I used to think that many years later, when people thought of Ajahn Tiradhammo, all that would be left would be teeth. Everything else would be gone, my hair and my skin and the rest of the thirty-two parts – just teeth would be left. It's interesting to reflect like that, because we naturally assume that we're going to persist, to just keep going.

There's a story of an early disciple of Ajahn Mun, the grandfather of the contemporary forest tradition in Thailand. This disciple was following the usual vocation of monks at that time as a schoolteacher, but he was also a very good meditator. Because this development of the thirty-two parts is a common meditation theme in southeast Asia, he was contemplating at least some of these parts of the body. One day he was teaching the children in the class, and he looked up from his desk to see a classroom full of skeletons there, just skeletons! Normally we see a skin-enclosed human being with clothes and so on, but because of his deep contemplation he saw skeletons instead; he saw beyond the normal superficial appearances of the body. After that he realized that he had to quit his job – obviously he was more interested in developing his meditation than in being a schoolteacher.

This sort of visualization is a very positive sign in meditation. It's called a *nimitta*, a vision. First of all we think about these parts, the skeleton, for example, or bones, and we have some kind of image of them. But when the image comes up as a strong vision, much more than just a fantasy or hallucination, this real and powerful vision comes from a deeper, clearer level of seeing, a deep concentration. And when that happens, it's not frightening, because it's not a fantasy. It is real, as real as seeing people as they appear normally. For example, when I was brushing my teeth, sometimes it was more like teeth-being-brushed rather than 'me' brushing my teeth. Sometimes it was just teeth and nobody brushing. But because it was

very natural and a development of meditation, it wasn't frightening. This is not like seeing a horror-movie frightening image – because this image had come from development of awareness, it was very peaceful. It wasn't a normal perception, but it was very peaceful because it was reality, seeing reality much more deeply and clearly. With it a certain dispassion arose too. It's hard to get excited about teeth when we truly see them. When we don't see them so clearly, we think, 'I have really good teeth' or 'I have bad teeth', and we get caught up in the stories about them. But if we just perceive teeth as they are, there are no more stories about them – it's just like seeing the truth, we don't argue about it.

The next formal exercise in developing body awareness is contemplating the four elemental qualities which comprise materiality – earth, fire, water, and air. At a monastery where I stayed in England there was an annual ten-day retreat, and usually the same people attended every year. I thought that rather than just give the same instructions, I'd do something else, so I chose a few different topics, and during the exercises in body awareness I suggested developing awareness of the four elemental qualities: earth, fire, water, air. This takes a bit of study at first – what are these elemental qualities? What is earth? It's not so much that we're made of dirt; rather, the earth element is hardness – the bones, the teeth, something solid, stable, substantial. The water element is fluidity, liquidity, expressing itself through the blood, saliva, tears and so on. The air element is distension: it fills things out as the breath does, but it's also what helps to move the limbs. It's the air element that allows us to walk and be mobile. And fire is the heat or cold in the body, and it's also the heat which causes aging and makes digestion take place, like a furnace.

By using these four elemental qualities as a template of the body, we can see it differently. Instead of me lifting my arm, there is the air element causing movement of 'earth' bones, 'water' blood and 'fire'

aging. My teeth are clacking – that's earth. If I'm swallowing, that's water. We have a different definition of the body as just these four elements here and now: earth, fire, water, air. Some people find this very useful because it gives a new perspective on physicality, rather than always referring back to 'my body' which is aching now, or is comfortable or hungry or cold. If it's cold, it's just the heat element. If it's hungry, it's the heat element as digestion. If there's an ache somewhere, it's the air element, so instead of my body feeling painful, it's just the air element out of order.

Being able to look in this new way gives a different perspective, and maybe enables us to see not only change or impermanence, but another characteristic of the body – impersonality. It's not a personal entity, not controlled by a person. It's just cause and effect, energies and forces going on. When we look at the body in terms of these four elemental qualities, just earth, water, fire or air moving, where is the person? Where is the entity, where is the soul, where is the self? There are just these four elements moving. This can be quite liberating, in the sense that we don't have to worry about our teeth because they're just the earth element and eventually they go back to the earth (maybe someone will dig them up in ten thousand years!) Air goes back to the air, water to water, heat to heat.

So I can be less personalized and less obsessed with regard to my body, because it's really just these universal elements. The air which allows my arm to move is the air that also blows through the trees. The earth element in this body is the same as the rocks in the stream down there. So we join nature. That's where we came from through eating and drinking, and that's where we'll end up. Looking at it in this way enables us to be a bit more receptive to the truth of this body. Rather than its being my particular situation which I try to control, or my personal problem, the body is just nature which subsists here for maybe seventy years. And then it'll return to nature again, but as elements it will still be there in some form or another.

Another practice with regard to the body which is mentioned in the scriptures but rarely used in the West is known as 'cemetery contemplations', i.e. contemplating the body in various states of decay and dissolution. This body is going to pass away, but we always focus on its 'livingness'. However, we very rarely look at the body when it's decaying, and especially when it's dead. It may even be illegal to do so – a corpse must be quickly put in a coffin and whisked away. But when somebody died in the Buddha's time, the body was taken to the charnel-ground at the edge of the village and left there for the vultures to feed on. Nowadays, just the thought of a dead body, ugh! I once found a dead possum by my hut in New Zealand. It had been there about four or five days. The smell was absolutely revolting. As I removed it I had to keep it at arm's length, it was so disgusting. And that wasn't even my body, fortunately. We can't bury our own body, can we?

A less dramatic but more practical way to develop this exercise is to become aware of the aging nature of the body. We can observe the increased wrinkles on the hands and face, the decaying teeth or the creeping decrepitude of the body. This is a much more direct, immediate experience, which does not require any imagination, but just clearer seeing of what is already there.

Another effect of contemplating that this body is eventually going to fade away, decay and dissolve is that it actually gives us more appreciation of life. I think we just assume that we're going to live until one day we're not alive any more. But if we have a much clearer awareness that this body's definitely going to decay, every day that we're alive becomes quite a miracle, especially if we know a bit about anatomy. We get up in the morning and think, 'How can all this stuff keep working?' Cars break down in ten or twenty years, but this thing keeps going for sixty or eighty years. It gets rather worn out sometimes, but actually it's quite a miracle that it keeps going at all. So this contemplation changes our perception, giving

us an appreciation of life rather than just plugging along day after day. But how do we use this opportunity for maximum benefit, rather than just thinking, 'Ho hum, another day'? Another day for what? Will we appreciate this day, live it in a beneficial way, or will we just put up with it?

The meditations to develop awareness around these particular themes give us a clearer insight into the real nature of the body. By just bringing up in our mind the fact that this body is going to decay, we already know that something in us is impermanent. Maybe this is first an intellectual understanding, but when we really observe the body we may, for example, look in the mirror and see impermanence in another grey hair. Thus the understanding becomes personal – it's not just an abstract Buddhist scriptural teaching, but personal experience. By personalizing these abstract principles we see them directly, so that when old age and sickness come, we've already seen them, already anticipated them, and there's no surprise. We don't need to resist them and feel resentful about them – that's the way it is. The ultimate truths of impermanence and impersonality are embodied right here. I can say, 'OK, knee, behave yourself, don't cause me any problems, make it through the meditation', but all I can really do is just listen to the knee. I can't control it – that's the way it is.

AWARENESS-WISDOM

Teachers in the Forest Tradition talk about awareness and wisdom. They don't talk much about scriptural wisdom or intellectual wisdom; they talk about 'awareness wisdom', the wisdom which comes from direct seeing, direct experience. This is what the faculty of awareness becomes in its more developed sense. Normally our awareness is just being aware of what we want to be aware of; it's very subjectively controlled. We only want to be aware of the body when it's comfortable, but in the course of meditation, when we have

committed ourselves to sit for a certain time, the body may become uncomfortable. We can't escape from the discomfort, so we become more aware of it, developing that side of the awareness equation too. Thus we become more aware of the unsatisfactory nature of bodily experience. Previously we only paid attention to the body when it was comfortable, and as soon as it became uncomfortable we moved it back to comfort again. But that selective awareness is only seeing part of how the body is. If we can develop awareness so that it becomes a power in itself, it becomes less controlled by this selectivity of our preferences. This is when awareness breaks out from the limitations of subjectivity, and then we can be aware of a much fuller range of body, not just what we want to notice when it feels comfortable for us. We begin to experience the body in a whole range of situations beyond personal preferences. This is what the development of awareness can do. And of course, as we become more aware of the body, we also notice its relation to our feelings and states of mind, which is a very good foundation for developing awareness of the other themes of mindfulness.

AWARENESS OF FEELING TONES

The second of the attendings with mindfulness is feeling tones. 'Feeling tone' is the translation of the Pali word *vedanā*. It is the general emotional tone of our experience, whether it's pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The scriptures mention up to 108 different feeling tones, but we will keep it simple with just three: pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Try to appreciate the difference between these definitions of feeling. If we ask how someone is feeling, they don't normally answer, 'pleasant', 'unpleasant' or 'neutral'. It's usually, 'I'm feeling great', or 'I'm feeling terrible', or 'I'm feeling fine'. For most people, feeling refers to the emotions, but in Buddhist terminology *vedanā* is that general feeling tone of emotion as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is a very important topic, because these feeling tones are the whole basis of what motivates us. Very simply, we can say

that most people's main motivation in life is to experience pleasant feeling tone and get away from unpleasant feeling tone, and they don't know or are unclear about neutral feeling tone.

If we have neutral feeling tone we just sit there with not much happening, but when pleasant feeling tone comes, we think, 'Oh, isn't that nice? How can I get more of that?' An unpleasant feeling tone comes along and we think, 'How can I get away from this?' These three feeling tones sound rather insipid: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. They don't amount to ecstasy or hell. But they are the fundamental motivating influences of our lives – towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant. So becoming more aware of them is very beneficial, because we can begin to see just how we are being impersonally controlled by them. If we investigate feeling tones in the course of a sitting, for example, we'll notice how much they change. If our whole life is built on feeling tones though they're so ephemeral, so unreliable, our life will also be pretty unreliable. If I'm just living for pleasant feeling tone and it's changing so quickly, I've essentially built my life on sand. By developing awareness of feeling tones, our direct seeing gives us understanding of them, insight into their true nature and how they motivate us.

There are also a variety of ways to distinguish feeling tones. For example, there are feeling tones that arise from bodily sensations and feeling tones from conditions of mind. In the discourses on the development of mindfulness an important distinction is made between 'worldly' feeling tones and 'non-worldly' feeling tones; that is, it is very important to be able to determine whether certain feeling tones arise from a spiritual source. This is especially relevant when we come to the topic of joy as a factor of awakening, as the Buddha recognized the significance of pleasant spiritual feeling tone on the path to awakening.

AWARENESS OF CONDITIONS OF MIND

The third theme is conditions of mind. Actually, this theme is rather hard to define, because a 'condition of mind' suggests a condition with a definite boundary. In my experience many conditions of mind are not so easily distinguishable; they often flow together. The word translated as mind, *citta,* means the contents of our mind, what's going on mentally. As you will probably appreciate, quite a few different levels may be involved. As we observe our condition of mind, for example, whether the mind is busy or not, we may also observe what sort of busyness is going on in the mind, or what types of thoughts or memories are arising.

The theme on conditions of mind specifically refers to a range of sixteen mental conditions, but these are by no means the only ones which can occur. Is the mind obsessed with aversion, for example? Are we carrying aversion with us from some event which happened last week or last year? Or is there some greed, some longing or desire for certain things, like wanting to have that new car we saw today? Or is there just delusion, states of confusion, doubt and uncertainty crowding into our life? We can also notice the lack of those things. Maybe on the one hand things look a bit negative – I'm carrying this aversion around with me – but on the other hand there's no greed. I find it helpful to look at what is not in the mind, when the mind is not obsessed by greed or aversion or delusion. This does happen sometimes, actually more often than we imagine. When I was experiencing my backache I had no serious aversion; there was a little irritation with the backache, but I had no greed to go to my hut and lie down. It wasn't very deluding because there was some clarity in observing it. So we're also able to be aware when those qualities are not there, those times when the mind is not obsessed with greed, aversion, or delusion.

There are, of course, a great variety of conditions of mind. Some of those specifically mentioned in the scriptures are whether the mind is contracted or distracted, exalted or closed in, incomparable or not, concentrated or not and liberated or not. To be aware of these conditions we may need to step back from the specific contents to observe the prominent overall condition, similar to taking a weather check. Conditions of mind also include emotions. In Buddhist terminology emotions come in the category of conditions of mind or mentality. Emotions are very energized thoughts or memories, and that energy can be harnessed. If we are able to non-reactively observe the energy behind aversion or greed, we may be able to tune into it. Trying to resist it drains energy away – 'Poor me, I've been meditating for twenty years, I shouldn't have greed or aversion.' But if we can open to emotions and receive them as they are, what is that like? It doesn't mean we grasp and indulge them, but rather that we tune into them. It's like bringing our hands closer to the fire, but taking care not to get burned. We have to know the right distance – too far away and we don't get warm, too close and we're burned, and this depends on our degree of collectedness and our development of awareness.

If we are still functioning in a reactive mode, we can be pulled into the energy, or we don't want to see this greed, aversion and delusion; we want to blot it out or sit there with a blank mind. But when awareness is sufficiently developed, it steps outside those old habitual reactions. It has a power of its own rather than being controlled by our preferences. Awareness can look at this stuff, because that's what comes on the screen. Our old habits don't want to see it, they want a blank screen. But then we are choosing the kind of awareness that suits us, rather than allowing awareness to be its own power.

I find it helpful to see these conditions of mind as 'mental weather'. In the same way as we observe the changes in the weather, we can

observe the changes in mental conditions, and behind that is our 'mental climate'. Maybe our mind's general climate is windy and wet. Something comes up and we make it wet, we put a wet blanket on things. When we ask some people how they are, it's always, 'Very well, very well!' Others always say, 'Not too bad.' That's their general disposition, their mental climate – not too bad (wet climate), or wonderful! (sunny climate). And then there's the mental weather. Somebody can be generally of a sunny disposition, but then an emotional storm comes in and they're not so sunny any more. That's just the passing weather. We can be very even-minded, but then some crisis arises in our life and all kinds of strange things come up, all kinds of atypical reactions may manifest. Someone who is normally unflustered can become very flustered when their 'buttons are pushed'. However, if we have developed this exercise of awareness of mental conditions, we may be able to step back into the observing mode rather than getting caught up in a reactive mode which not only affirms the condition, but also leads to further mental conditions, and on and on.

AWARENESS OF THE DHAMMAS

The fourth theme is called dhammas. This word 'dhamma' has many different meanings in different contexts, but here it means phenomena or categories. This theme of dhammas comprises five topics: the Hindrances, the Aggregates, the six senses and sense objects, the Seven Factors of Awakening and the Four Noble Truths.

There's a progression in this teaching, moving on to more and more refinement of awareness. If we observe the whole range of conditions of mind, we begin to see patterns emerging. For example, we observe which conditions pull the mind down, distract the mind, cloud the mind. They're subsumed into a category called the Five Hindrances.[3] Likewise, we begin to see that these Seven Factors of

3 The Five Hindrances are explored in greater detail in the chapter on Concentration.

Awakening are also in the mind. That's useful to know – the Seven Factors of Awakening are in our mind already; we just need to observe them, be mindful of them, be aware of them in their context. We can be aware of certain qualities, tranquillity for example. We have tranquillity sometimes, but do we really appreciate it in its context as a Factor of Awakening? When tranquillity rises, we may think we ought to be doing something. Why be tranquil? There's this pile of books to read. We could do something else rather than just be tranquil. But by realizing that tranquillity is one of the factors of awakening, we can begin to appreciate it in the right context. Tranquillity inclined towards laziness may just be wasting time, but tranquillity as a positive factor that calms down mental and bodily activity becomes an important factor for awakening.

It's a matter of observing and watching for these factors to come together. If we can carefully watch all these conditions arising in the mind, it can be like watching sheep being herded in the right way – Hindrances over there and Factors of Awakening over here. We begin to recognize what to watch out for.

If we aren't aware of the Hindrances as Hindrances and don't know what they do to us, we may actually be cultivating them. Maybe we're cultivating laziness and thinking it's tranquillity, sitting there snoring and thinking we're tranquil, when it's actually sleepiness we're cultivating. That's a Hindrance, not a Factor of Awakening!

But one person's tranquillity may be someone else's laziness – it's very individual. A common experience in the heat of Thailand is the Hindrance called sloth and torpor. Even when the teacher was teaching, some monks would be torpid. People would think that sleeping during the talk was not very respectful, but one teacher said, 'Their ears are still open, it's OK, they're still hearing.' Maybe they were not in a sleep state, just a very tranquil state of receptivity. Their ears were open, and they heard the teaching and it went very deep, whereas if they were sitting upright there might have been

a lot of self-consciousness blocking or judging what they heard, so they didn't actually receive it openly. We can't judge other people's awareness by their physical expressions.

Another theme of the dhammas is developing awareness of the activity of the six senses: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind as a sense organ. It is through the senses that we put a 'world' together and then create our interpretations, opinions and reactions. This is a very rich area of investigation and a deep source of wisdom.

A further theme is to see our experience in terms of the Five Aggregates, the basic psycho-physical aspects of our self, i.e. materiality, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. Clearly seeing these constituent parts of our being and how they arise and pass away can give very deep insight into non-self or impersonality.

The last dhamma is the contemplation of the Four Noble Truths, the uniquely Buddhist teaching on suffering, its cause, its cessation and the Eightfold Path to the cessation of suffering. With the deepening of this realization, a comprehensive understanding of the entire extent and profundity of the Buddha's teaching is attained.

The development of each of the exercises is further explained to encompass four general principles. The first one is to contemplate them internally (within oneself), externally (in another person) and both internally and externally. This allows a broadening out of awareness to include their more general nature as opposed to specific details. The second principle is contemplating the nature of arising, the nature of passing away and the nature of both arising and passing away relating to each exercise. Thus one is encouraged to actively contemplate the universal characteristic of impermanence, one of the ultimate truths of insight. Next we are reminded to establish mindfulness just for the purpose of knowledge and continued mindfulness. Finally, the practitioner is directed to 'abide independent' and 'not cling to anything in the

world'. These two phrases are often used to refer to an advanced state of spiritual attainment for which the practice of mindfulness is specifically prescribed.

CONCLUSION

It takes some degree of study to know what these four attendings with mindfulness are. That's part of what the Buddha's teaching provides for us. It's like having a recipe: we can just go into the kitchen, throw some things together and hope the dish comes out all right, or we can look in the recipe book and get the proper recipe. Maybe we still can't follow the recipe, but at least we know how it should be. That's the benefit of having the Buddha's teachings; he gives us this recipe for awakening, the development of mindfulness. So once we know what the recipe is, we can apply it, we can do our best with it. If we don't know that there is this diverse range of topics, we might struggle to try to develop body awareness for years, but get nowhere. And then we might begin to work with the feeling tones and really benefit from that; we might have a special ability to work with the feeling tones. Others who are more analytically inclined may need to work with some of the dhammas. If they look at conditions of mind they may not see anything but a blank window. But what about the Five Hindrances, what about sloth and torpor? They know that. Once they receive some direction, this can lead them into a more direct experience of their mind through recognizing those Hindrances. Others can be inspired when they recognize what the Factors of Awakening are. So by having a broad knowledge of what these instructions are we have many openings, many ways of entering into this teaching and finding what suits us, finding some accessibility to it. Otherwise we may just hear different bits and pieces of the teachings and think that's all there is.

By knowing what these different aspects of the Buddha's teachings are, we also see the diversity of mindfulness practice. At the very

beginning of the scripture about mindfulness, the Buddha is quoted as saying that this is the 'direct path'[4] to realizing awakening. The scriptures outline many different ways of practice which lead to awakening, but mindfulness is the main one. The practice of mindfulness brings together all these factors: body, feeling tones, conditions of mind; all these categories, the Five Hindrances, the Five Aggregates, the six senses and sense objects, the Seven Factors of Awakening, the Four Noble Truths. It's the primary way, the main way to the realization of awakening.

So the practice of mindfulness is a very comprehensive summary of so many aspects of the Buddha's teachings. I think that's why the Buddha said it is the direct path to realizing awakening. Mindfulness is a very important foundation of the teachings. If we're able at least to recognize its breadth intellectually and then put it into practice, we can realize its depth as well. Seeing how this body and this mind really are can lead us to experience the way things really are directly, in the ultimate sense of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality. We start with awareness in an elementary sense, and once developed it becomes mindfulness, which I interpret as 'full awareness of mind'. When we're aware of the body, we start off with a sense of 'I' doing it. First of all it's, 'I'm being aware of my body'; that's the first level. The next level is, 'I'm being aware of the body'. It's not so much mine anymore, just the body as physical conditions. Then comes, 'I'm just being aware; and finally, just awareness, with nobody being aware. If there still is a sense of 'I' being aware, it's not full awareness of mind, there's still a bit of 'me' in it. But once awareness is developed in the fullest sense, there's fully complete awareness of mind. The mind is fully aware, without any need for a sense of self to know it, to be aware, to be present. And this full awareness of mind can penetrate through

4 So Bodhi in note 135 to his and Bhikkhu Ñanamoli's translation of MN (Wisdom Publications, 1995); and Analayo, pp.26-8.

the ignorance of selfhood and reveal the truth of impersonality. That's the highest development of mindfulness or awareness, pure awareness.

So this is a practice, a development of awareness, which then becomes wisdom. We have the wisdom to know the way things really are: impermanent, unsatisfactory and impersonal. We've seen it directly. We don't need to read a book about it. We've seen it for ourselves.

This is only the beginning of the Factors of Awakening, but already we're well on the way.

2 INVESTIGATION OF DHAMMA

MEDITATION

Take up a reasonably comfortable sitting position, keeping the back upright.

Begin by bringing attention to the body sitting here, sensing into the body, becoming aware of the sensation of body. Is any sensation particularly strong? Settle your attention there for a moment. Is this sensation familiar, or is it quite new? As you observe it, is there some sense of whether it is fairly constant or merely passing? Do you have some sense of how it came to be, or what might cause it to pass?

Now bring attention to the sensation of natural breathing. Is this experience familiar to us or is it something new? Are we aware of the sensation of breathing directly, or is it more of a concept? Is this sensation reasonably constant or do you notice it changing?

Now bring attention to the general feeling tone at this moment. Is it pleasant, unpleasant or neutral? Is it body-based or mind-based? Is this a familiar feeling tone or a new one? Does it seem to be quite constant or do you notice changes?

Now bring attention to the condition of the mind right now. What condition of mind is most prominent at the moment? Is this condition of mind familiar to you, or is it something new? Are you able to get a sense of its persistence, or constancy, or perhaps its fragility? Are you able to notice when and how it arises, or when and how it passes?

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The title of this chapter is 'Investigation of Dhamma'. The word 'dhamma' has a number of meanings, depending upon the context in which it's used. It can mean Dhamma as the Buddha's teachings, or it can just mean things or phenomena. Often both these meanings are meant simultaneously; that is, one sees phenomena in relationship to the Buddha's teaching. In this particular context, coming as it does after the topic of Mindfulness, 'Investigation of dhamma' usually means investigation of the phenomena which the development of mindfulness has revealed. We may be aware of certain aspects of body, feeling tones, and conditions of mind. However, some of these phenomena may require, or at least benefit from, deeper investigation, examination or enquiry. Knowing as we do that all things arise from causes, it may be that some phenomena of which we become aware are only the effects of an as yet unclear cause, and can only be ultimately resolved by uncovering their fundamental root cause.

There are different stages in the development of awareness. Usually awareness is very subjective. For example, I don't like looking at my stupid thoughts – I like the intelligent ones. But every once in a while a stupid one comes along, and then the mind reacts – 'Oh! Don't look at that'. So what I look at, what I'm aware of, can be quite subjective. But when awareness has more strength, we become aware of many more aspects of our experience. And the more awareness can be developed, the less there is of this subjective bias. For example, you begin to see thoughts in general, rather than just 'my thoughts

that I like'. And when you observe thoughts in general, you start to notice certain patterns emerging.

OBSERVATION

The investigation of phenomena involves having enough awareness to be able to observe without judging. This observation isn't analyzing or thinking about anything; it is rather a clear, silent seeing of the *actual* condition of body and mind. Sometimes just seeing certain habits of body or patterns of mind clearly may make it possible to resolve them. Other times, however, they may persist – they may keep coming back again and again, and then just observing phenomena isn't quite enough. What we're actually seeing then is only the tip of the iceberg of a much more extensive causal process. Our awareness has only developed enough to see part of that much deeper process, so this investigation requires some ability to probe into things. It's like sending awareness *into* some particular specialized area of our experience, investigating it more thoroughly. And if it's coming out of the practice of mindfulness, then it's examining things that are very relevant to us and that are happening right now.

I'll take an example, such as the sensation of having hunched-up shoulders while you're sitting meditating. Maybe you relax when you first notice it. But then it may come back again. A personal rule of thumb I have is that if something comes back more than three times, perhaps it needs some special attention. And there are various stages in which you can give it that attention. The first stage is just settling our attention on it for a moment or so, rather than going back to the breathing. Maybe that resolves it. Maybe it just wants attention! But sometimes, if it comes back again, it may need some special attention – openly observing – what is it really? What is it on a deeper existential level? Sometimes we may *think* that we know the sensation, and we give it a name, we label it. So with the

example of hunched-up shoulders, maybe that's how we label the sensation, but the label's just a comfortable or acceptable term to use. Maybe in reality they're more like 'beaten-down' shoulders, which don't sound so appropriate – implying I'm beaten down by life isn't so acceptable!

So it is helpful to have a humble, enquiring attitude if we begin an investigation, asking, 'What is this *really*?'. Are my shoulders really hunched-up, or is my neck hunched down? Or maybe my neck is sticking out forward? And we can deepen this awareness by investigating the tension in the neck, or by looking to see if the sensation relates elsewhere physically, such as in the lower back or other parts of the body. We can also extend our observing to the realm of feeling tones. What's the feeling tone? Maybe its physical aspect is unpleasant – an unpleasant feeling tone (unless you particularly like hunched-up shoulders). But if you look at it from the mental or emotional point of view it can be pleasant. Then we investigate why that is. Maybe it's something to do with feeling emotionally secure, a sense of safety or being defended. But it's good not to be too speculative, but just to question without judging. Allow awareness to answer the enquiry.

Or we could observe from the point of view of conditions of mind. Maybe you notice that your condition of mind is hunched-up as well. Your mind isn't very spacious and the body follows suit. So now you're investigating the mental condition as it is linked with a physical expression. Or we can use the template of greed, aversion and delusion. Maybe this sensation is associated with greed. Maybe it's an outward movement that has been inhibited, like a slap on the hand – 'Don't reach for it!'. Or maybe it's related to aversion, like pushing something away, that 'got-my-back-up' feeling. Or maybe it's associated with delusion –'I don't know'. That's one of my familiar ones! Or it could be resignation – 'I really don't know, and don't care either'.

A further development is to observe enquiringly in terms of what is the beginning or origin of the phenomenon. For example, with the hunched-up shoulders – are they there at the beginning of the sitting, the middle, the end? If all three, they're pretty consistent! Is it there when we wake up? When we go to sleep? Or maybe it's only there in certain circumstances, such as when we're on the way to work, or when we have to talk to our boss. Or maybe it grows stronger when we go home to our family. How about when it ceases? Does it eventually fade away or end? Maybe the phenomenon only eases if we really relax into it, or breathe into it.

DISENGAGING

Another aspect of investigation of dhamma is disengaging from a direct subjective relationship with phenomena. Usually we relate to phenomena from the subject-object perspective, which locks into our own subjective habits, interpretations and presumptions. We keep relating from a limited, self-affirming approach, which continues to affirm the phenomenon in the same familiar way. To investigate more clearly, openly and honestly, we need to be able to move beyond this familiar frame of reference. Thus an attitude of disengaging from phenomena can be useful, though of course we need to be careful that this is not dissociating or disconnecting from them, but rather a stepping outside the usual subject-object relationship. Among the ways of creating this are by relating from an attitude of curiosity (what is this?) or disinterest (just a thought), or by de-emphasizing (it's all passing) or dis-identifying (just mental activity).

An attitude of curiosity or sense of wonderment allows disengagement into a more investigative mode by stepping outside conceptualizing – 'Hey, that's interesting!' – and we can cross-reference this through awareness of sensations, feeling tones and conditions of mind. Disinterest is not a tuning out or turning

away, but rather the attitude that this is not really important – it is there, but not important right now. If it is really important, it will continue to be there in some form. De-emphasizing can be useful when something tends to dominate or obsess the mind. For a time we can fix our attention on something else, and then go back to it, hopefully from a different perspective or with a more spacious mind. Dis-identifying is stepping back to a less personalized relationship. For example, rather than focusing on one particular thought, we step back to observe thoughts in general. Rather than seeing only 'my thought', we observe the train of thoughts.

A practical example of this for me was during a period when I was practising in Thailand and was bothered by the phenomenon of people's faces coming up in meditation. They were not usually frightening, but just bothersome and distracting. I wasn't sure what this meant or what caused it, and became somewhat preoccupied with it. One teacher I knew, who was renowned for his deep concentration practice and supposed psychic powers, said that I was picking up the consciousness of soldiers who had been killed in a World War Two battle nearby. That was spooky! However, it did not feel quite right to me, partly because I did not think my meditation was so advanced, but also because the faces were sometimes female, children or elderly people, and not only young men. Later I was fortunate to be able to ask Ajahn Chah about this. He called it 'mental phenomena', and said, 'Just observe it, and don't be fascinated by it. Know it and go back to the breathing.' We can become attracted by such things because they're new and interesting. He said that I might either become quite excited about them, thinking I had psychic powers like precognition, seeing the face of someone who next day might offer food, or I might think that maybe ghosts were haunting me. But they were just mental phenomena.

All kinds of things like this can happen in meditation, and if you can recognize them and be more objective, less personally involved with

them, eventually they just fall away. They're like tricks the mind plays to attract you into believing in it – me and my face stories again. But they are just mental phenomena, images arising and passing away, thoughts coming and going. If you can put yourself in this more objective state, rather than personalizing the phenomena, eventually they fade away. And that's what finally happened for me, the faces went away. Also, by being more objective about the phenomenon, I could see what the cause was. I realized that at some time very early in my life, maybe even when I was lying in the cradle, my mind started taking photographs of people's faces – 'That's Dad, that face is Mum, I don't know who that face is'. It became a habit and I kept on like that, taking pictures of faces all the time, click, click, click. I did a lot of travelling for two years and took many mental pictures of peoples' faces, all those strangers. This allowed me to become quite proficient at recognizing people by their faces, although I was hopeless at remembering names. Then, however, I saw how this habit was having the effect of a photo replay when the mind calmed down. With this insight I then 'turned off the camera' and the popping-up faces faded away. Unfortunately, however, now I am not only hopeless at remembering names, I am also hopeless at remembering people's faces!

An important point to understand is that disengaging is not dissociating or 'spacing out'. Nor is it about depersonalizing in the schizoid sense of thinking 'this is not me'. All these phenomena are aspects of you, but they are not yours. They are just phenomena expressed as you. When we truly see this, these phenomena are viewed as personal, but not identified with as the ultimate 'me'.

Another point is that many of these phenomena are merely parts of the cause-effect continuum. We wake up to one part of it, think that this is the thing itself, and then become involved with it and try to solve it, when in fact it is just one aspect of the continuum. If we can step back somewhat, that is, disengage from the 'thing' itself,

we are able to have a wider, fuller perspective, which can reveal the underlying cause of the phenomenon so that real resolution can take place.

ENGAGING

We can also investigate through what I call 'engaging', that is, engaging with these phenomena. We have to be a little careful here, because if we engage with something we can actually reinforce it or affirm it. After all, the Buddha pointed out that grasping was one of the root causes of our suffering. However, in order to investigate something we have to come to grips with it in some way, but we have to hold it just right. Maybe an appropriate image is handling an egg. If we hold it too tightly, it goes 'squish', if we don't hold it tightly enough it falls to the floor. So we engage with phenomena in a suitable way, as a means of facilitating a deeper investigation.

So if your shoulders are hunched, you can try to accentuate this. Hunch them even more, and see what happens to your mind and body. Or you can try going the other way, de-accentuating the hunching, and see what happens. You could even do some kind of mindful moving or active meditative exercises. Maybe there are just some blocked muscles or some tension. Sometimes when things really persist on the physical level, we have to take them a little more seriously and engage with them in earnest.

On the emotional level we can enquire, 'If this phenomenon had a voice, what would it say' (besides 'ouch')? Would it say 'Relax' or 'Be kind to me', or 'Don't push so hard'? Or we can be a little more creative, and enquire, 'What colour is this?', or 'What song does it sing?', 'What dance does it do?', 'What movement would it make?'

And then we can engage with the feeling tone. If it seems to be very unpleasant we can accentuate it, make it more dramatic. For

example, we all know that anger is not very pleasant, but it still comes up sometimes. So if you happen to be in front of a mirror one day, make an angry face, really accentuate it. It's so absurd how ugly and how ridiculous you look that it just makes you laugh! So sometimes taking phenomena to their extremes turns them around. Walking around with your shoulders hunched all day is absurd. If you're unaware of it people won't say anything, but if you do it intentionally they'll begin to ask, 'Hey, have you got a problem or something?'

So in this way we need to be creative and a little more engaging – engaging in a skilful way with some of these experiences so that we're actually working with them, playing with them, rather than affirming them. We're working gently with them rather than against them, all from a basis of awareness.

SEEDING THE MIND

Maybe a more advanced stage is to be able just to 'seed the mind'. This is a process of keeping some connection with these phenomena, but then going back to the calm or the focused attention. The point of this is to create more objectivity, and the more deeply calm the mind is, the more clearly we can see into it. As Ajahn Chah once said, 'The deeper the calm, the deeper the insight.'

The reason we often can't see the true nature of things is that we're involved with them too subjectively and are afraid of what they might reveal about our egos. But if we step back from these phenomena, they become not so much 'my story' as just 'a story'. It's similar to watching a movie that's extremely enjoyable – when it ends you can say, 'Well, that's not my story. That's not me.' You may have been taken through all kinds of impassioned human emotions (if the film is really good), but then you can go peacefully back to your own ordinary life.

So we 'seed the mind' with the relevant phenomenon, for example, the hunched-up shoulders. We sense into it clearly and vividly, and then settle the mind on the calm breath. Sometimes, when the measure of the level of calm is right, things are revealed. This allows something to arise from a deeper level of our consciousness, a deeper level of our psyche, perhaps the intuitive level. A subtler level of self-knowing has been revealed. And when things are fully conscious, you can let them go.

It takes a certain amount of trust for the process to work, but when the time is right, things may shift. Sometimes, though, we don't have an instant answer – maybe it won't be revealed to us right now. This may mean that we need to develop more of the other Factors of Awakening, more tranquillity or more energy, for example.

So to investigate is to be able to go outside our comfort zones, our familiar territory. We usually just see things in a way that's familiar, a way that's comfortable for our egos. But it's very likely that the sources of some of these phenomena are quite unpleasant for the ego. Investigation may reveal your negativity, or your guardedness, or something else which your ego isn't ready to accept, to recognize, to receive. And this comes from our awareness practice. Most of us probably associate investigation with our thinking – 'Is it this, is it that?' But what we are talking about here is investigation based on direct experience – it's not just intellectualizing, although sometimes engaging our brain can allow a teasing out, so that we can get a sense of what's behind a phenomenon.

And we can apply this investigation to everything – to emotional habits, to thought patterns and so on. We can bring awareness to the deeper levels of all these. And we can see with Buddhist insight that all things arise because of a cause, and when we go back to the root cause things are finally resolved. The Buddha's teachings can give us an overview or a template, which we can then apply to our experience. We can see how things fit and find ways to work with them.

I notice my own tendency, when I experience something that is emotionally or physically unpleasant, to want to change it – I want to make it 'good'. I want to be the 'good guy'. That is not seeing what is really there or relating to the phenomenon as it is, but my own ego's interpretation of it and interference with it. Thus I'm feeding into the ego-trip again. With this way of relating we may 'resolve' the hunched-up shoulders, but then we get a stomach ache! We haven't really resolved the whole issue – we've just changed the symptoms to something a bit more tolerable. Our coping strategies are more efficient, but we are still just coping. And until we see the whole coping process, we can't really step outside it.

If you observe sensations with consistent attention over a period of time, you notice that they're always changing – fortunately, otherwise my leg might fall off! If I move my leg the sensation changes; it's not a permanently abiding thing. So if we can see how things are always changing, how things arise and cease, how something initiates a phenomenon and causes it to change; we know about cause and effect. And who is the owner of all this? No one. There are just these various phenomena arising and passing away.

So we consistently observe these phenomena – not to affirm them, but rather to enquire into them, to investigate, to search, to discover, to find out what they're really like, what their real essence is. This kind of understanding, then, is on a deeper level. This is wisdom – seeing the fuller picture which is more integrated, a fuller understanding. Thus in its most developed form, investigation of dhamma arrives at wisdom.

3 ENERGY

MEDITATION

Take up a comfortable sitting position, keeping the back upright.

Begin by bringing attention to the body sitting, tuning in to the condition of body as it is right now. Are there any places where there is some strong or obvious sensation? If so, we try to relax or relieve these strong sensations as much as possible.

Next we bring attention to the sensation of natural breathing. What is the quality of that breathing process? Is it flowing freely and openly, or does it feel somewhat constricted? Settle the attention upon this breathing process.

Now for a moment return attention to the sensation of body. Can you notice any obvious degree of energy in the body, or any obvious lack of energy? Is the energy you notice something you are creating or forcing, or is it there quite naturally? Bring attention back to the breathing again.

Now for a moment bring attention to the feeling tone. Is the most prominent feeling tone pleasant, unpleasant or neutral? Do you notice any particular energetic response with that feeling tone? Then go back to focusing attention on the breathing once again.

For a moment bring attention to the condition of the mind. What degree of energy is there with that condition? Would you say it is energetic, or lacking energy, or other? Is the energy something you are making or causing, or is it due to something else?

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The theme of this chapter is energy, a very important theme in the Buddha's teachings. Energy is the third of the Seven Factors of Awakening. It's also one of the Five Faculties, one of the Five Powers and a factor of the Eightfold Path. So the Buddha was very emphatic about energy. Fundamentally this goes back to the principle of what's called kamma in his teachings. 'Kamma' literally means 'action', and the Buddha defined it as *intentional* action which has the potential to produce a result. His teaching was based on the principle that a person could put forth energy to generate skilful results, such as realizing awakening by developing the Factors of Awakening. In the Buddha's time, like today, there were various philosophies around, some of which were very deterministic or fatalistic. Some people believed you were born into a certain situation and there was nothing you could do about it; you just had to bide your time and maybe, if you were a reasonably good person for countless aeons of time, you would eventually be welcomed into the bosom of God. Others believed that whatever happened to you was just an accident, a mere chance occurrence.

The Buddha's teaching, however, is based upon causal action, developing spiritual qualities so as to create the conditions that give rise to realizing awakening. Of course, in practical terms some people have more difficulty than others. Some people seem to be born saints; others have to work really hard at spiritual practice. But it is possible to develop spiritual qualities, and energy is very much key to doing so. It's not the only requisite, of course. Energy is developed within the context of all these other factors: the Seven Factors of Awakening, the Five Spiritual Faculties and Powers, the

Eightfold Path. This quality of energy, this exertion, this putting forth of effort has two aspects to it: the development of energy itself, and the development of right effort. Energy can sometimes just be neutral. But what is most important is how we channel that energy, how we use it.

ENERGY – PHYSICAL AND MENTAL

Energy is both physical and mental. In our society these days we know more about physical energy, because of increased consciousness of health issues, keeping fit and in good health through proper exercise and suitable food, for example. How aware are you of changes in your physical energy? When I first practised in Thailand, my understanding of meditation was as basically just sitting, sitting, sitting, until my legs almost fell off. Then I wondered why I had trouble with sleepiness and nodding a lot. When I went to Ajahn Chah's monastery, there was not a lot of formal sitting in the routine. There was much more activity – walking meditation, long periods of walking in the mornings for alms food, periods of sweeping leaves in the afternoons and other quite vigorous activity. When I had a chance to practise on my own in a mountain hermitage I found that I actually did more walking than sitting meditation, and it was very invigorating once I developed the physical strength for it. The sittings became better and clearer. I was no longer just sitting and having the mind become dull, being in a half-asleep state and thinking, 'This is cool meditation!' – peaceful, but not very clear, just floating around in some kind of dull state in a sort of never-never land. When I put more energy into walking meditation, it gave the quality of the sitting much more clarity, and vitality too.

Body and mind are inter-related. Too often meditation is interpreted or emphasized as just a state of mind – you sit there and watch your breath, and forget about the body. But you have to sit with the body too, and if your body is not in good physical condition it's very

hard to watch the breathing. Your mind is not very clear, not very energized. So some states of mental dullness may just be due to physical ill-health, they may have a physical source.

Then there is mental energy, of which there are many types. Often, however, it's largely goal-oriented energy or willpower. We come from a very goal-oriented society with goal-oriented attitudes, and we usually bring those attitudes with us to spiritual practice. How much of our aspiration, our motivation for coming to spiritual practice, is to achieve a particular result? We want this enlightenment thing! We dangle this carrot, enlightenment, and we keep moving it away. Actually, it's just a phantom – there, I've given the game away! I mean that enlightenment is not a thing. You can't 'get' enlightenment as if it were a carrot. It needs to be fully realized. This may make some people's motivation fizzle out – if there's no marzipan carrot at the end of meditation, why do it? But it is possible to experience peace of mind or wisdom through meditation, although this is not a 'gettable' thing.

When I went to Thailand to meditate, my motivation for going there was not enlightenment *per se*. I had given up on that, it was beyond me. I had reduced my goal to something that was more meaningful to me; just calmness of mind, peacefulness of mind, being able to sit with an empty mind, 'blissed-out', hopefully for the rest of my life. And I gave myself a whole month to achieve this! However, after beginning to practise, I realized both that it was not as easy as I had thought, and that peace of mind was just a concept I had. I was not opening to an experience, but chasing a concept. Our goals are usually nothing more than concepts or ideas which we have. We have an image in our mind of what they might be like, and we pursue that image. That's all very well. I think that at a certain level of practice people probably need some of that type of motivation. Why are they practising – for enlightenment, peace of mind, freedom from suffering, or what? However, if we really want to continue with the

practice, we need to ease ourselves out of the concept-dominated, goal-oriented attitude. The right attitude for practice means really letting go of all the props of selfhood, including the goal of enlightenment. Through relinquishing, putting down, surrendering the supports for self-grasping, we can tune into another kind of energy, the energy of relaxation and release, an exhilarating energy. For this, however, we need a 'long-haul' attitude. Rather than rushing frantically towards some ideal goal, we need to shift the emphasis to the here-and-now practice, outside a time-bound end. It is very hard to relax when we are fenced in by a set goal or a fixed time – better just to start where we are and see how far we go.

So one aspect of the meditation process is waking up from a concept-oriented approach to life to an experiential one. We become more aware of what is, rather than what should be, or what we would like things to be or think they should be. By at least acknowledging that aspect of reality as a possibility, we may slowly wake up to it. If we're still concept-oriented it is very hard to meditate, because breathing is not a concept, being aware of your thoughts is not a concept. Maybe the concept gives us a direction to pursue, but to be aware of the breathing one has to let go of the concept and move to the direct experience. Really knowing one's mind means being with that mind as it is, not just with ideas such as: 'Oh, maybe I'm thinking, maybe I'm imagining, maybe I'm doing this, maybe I'm doing something else', but reaching the direct experience of what is actually going on in the mind.

AROUSING ENERGY

The most powerful motivator for spiritual practice is a sense of spiritual urgency (*saṃvega*). We may be having a life crisis or know others who have experienced severe suffering, and this may stimulate us to seek a spiritual solution. Even if we are not overwhelmed by distress we may have some reflective capacity for

considering what the real purpose of life is, but unfortunately it often takes some serious emotional shake-up to rattle us out of our complacency.

Among the meditation themes suggested for rousing energy is the contemplation of our imminent death. Or reflecting on the theme that all conditioned things are unsatisfactory may inspire a more diligent attitude. The life of the Buddha is an example of this. He was trying to find out why there is suffering in the world. Why do people fall sick, grow old and die? He had lived a very sheltered life with every luxury, and then he was exposed to the realities of life. Personally, I see this as an allegorical description of most people's lives. When we are young we are often innocent of the wider implications of death, old age and sickness. We may fall sick, but are then so overwhelmed that we are not able to reflect upon it. We may notice old people or hear of people dying, but it is hard to understand fully what is happening. However, as we grow older we experience these natural processes more often, in different contexts and from a more developed reflective consciousness. We fall sick and have enough reflective consciousness to realize it's not nice to be sick. And we see that people close to us die. What is this? 'Oh, they've gone for a long holiday somewhere. They've gone to heaven.' Actually, they simply died. But what does that mean? For most of us the deaths of people are not very pleasant. As we wake up to these things we ask, 'Why? Why do people die? Why do people grow old, why do they suffer?' When the Buddha was confronted with this particular question, he went off to seek an answer through spiritual practice.

In a positive sense this is inspiration or faith. What inspires you to practise? Is it something like the principle of aspiring towards realization of truth? Or is it to imitate the Buddha, or gain something like enlightenment? What inspires us to keep going and motivates us? If our motives and inspiration are too goal-oriented they're a

bit crude, and probably won't work for very long. But maybe in the process we will see something else. Inspiration can motivate us, but unless it turns into a basis for understanding or wisdom, it's as if we're chasing a cloud.

Somewhat less spiritual, maybe, is curiosity, having an interest in something. For example, instead of being inspired by enlightenment we may be curious about it; what is it anyway, this thing called enlightenment or awakening? This approach is then transformed into something which is closer to investigation of dhamma, investigation of the truth, investigation of phenomena. And this interest may bring to light more and deeper levels of what motivates us. Likewise with the theme of energy; we take energy as a topic of interest and investigation. Where does energy come from? And maybe in this way we find a deeper source of the energy that keeps us going. Perhaps at the beginning we're inspired by the example of the Buddha, but deeper down we contemplate: what is this enlightenment? For example, I ask myself what it is that keeps people practising. Why do they persevere, what's their motivation? It seems to me to be something universal, like truth. They aren't just inspired by a person or by a certain philosophy. There's some aspiration to realize the truth, or realize how things are.

Sometimes we are inspired by a teacher. I must admit I found a kind of a second wind in my spiritual practice by meeting Ajahn Chah. He was inspiring because he was a very grounded and authentic human being. He wasn't always saying wonderful things, and he wasn't always so wonderful; he had body odour, he fell sick and died. But he did represent the possibility that one could practise the Buddha's teachings and achieve some realization. So there was an aspect of inspiration in knowing him. During the Rainy Season Retreat which I spent with him I would often go in the evenings and sit near him, just to listen to his conversations with visitors and resident monks. I found that I could sit there wide-awake for

hours, listening attentively. One evening, however, he dismissed us early and I headed back to my hut on the far side of the monastery. I noticed that the further away I walked from him, the more tired I felt, until I arrived at my hut and suddenly fell asleep. I then realized how much I had been feeding off his charisma; I had been vitalized by his energy, not my own. So I decided that I would have to leave his presence and learn to develop my own energy for practice.

Sometimes our energy level can be inspired for a while, but then it fades out. And what's left? What holds us up, what keeps us going? We can see that on the surface we're maybe kept going by some kind of energy such as willpower. I usually suggest that when people are aware of their energy level in the body and mind, they should also become aware of this willpower, for example by bringing attention to the body sitting upright. People may begin by sitting there as stiff as a brass Buddha statue, but they can't sustain that. They're just willing themselves to do it. But if they relax a little they may be able to experience what their natural level of energy is and sustain that practice. I must admit that willpower does work; some people have very strong willpower, so they can will themselves to sit for hours through much pain. But in the end they can't sustain it and ultimately they reinforce rigidity of body and mind.

So if we're only running on will, only one small part of our psyche is operating. The dark side of will is self-will or will to selfhood, the fundamental support of ego. This is usually expressed through desire or aversion. Some people generate a lot of energy from anger and aversion, and if we want something we will ourselves to get it. So we try to will ourselves to enlightenment – tonight will be the night! Or maybe we'll wait until the next full moon, to draw some extra energy from outside forces – then we'll sit through the whole night and wake up next to the Buddha! But it's more likely that we'll just get sore knees and be disappointed. However, on the positive side there is the desire or will to realize Dhamma (*dhamma-chanda*),

and a type of spiritual 'aversion' termed disenchantment (*nibbidā*). They serve to reduce the grasping of selfhood

Willpower can keep us going for a while, and then we can go to the opposite extreme, frustration and resentment, because things are not working and we haven't got what we wanted. When we reach that place we may be forced to surrender our wilfulness. Then we may notice that beneath it is something which is not so obvious or outstanding, but which is more important. We can open to the life force of simply being present with whatever is. There's a special quality to this energy which is more like a peaceful vitality, the power of presence into which we can tune.

Discovering and exploring a lack of energy is also part of investigating energy. It's quite common for people on meditation retreats to go through periods of sleepiness and dullness. Maybe this makes them frustrated or even embarrassed – everybody else is sitting there looking like the Buddha, and they're sweeping the floor with their hair! But rather than just resorting to willpower and forcing oneself to sit there and look like everybody else, one can begin to investigate the problem and maybe find what is hindering or blocking the free flow of energy within. Normally sloth and torpor is considered as one of the Five Hindrances, but for investigation of dhamma this is a very important area to investigate. It can be transformed into a great source of wisdom.

We have this experience of dullness or sleepiness because we are holding on to some aspect of our self. For example, if we're holding on to a fixed idea of what practice is and our practice isn't living up to that idea, there's a conflict. So our energy drains away. We may want to watch the breathing – that's what we should do, that's the good thing. Then the mind wanders off – wait a minute, hold it. Back again. Then the mind starts doing something else. If you really resist these fluctuations and start struggling against them, you'll waste your energy and end up sleepy and dull. But if you

can observe that the mind is wandering and have an open, aware attitude to it, you don't create this friction and struggling. Maybe the mind is not always on the breathing, but you are aware that the mind is wandering. That too is awareness, and it's awareness of what's really happening. Through this approach you find that the energy which before was wasted in the struggle becomes available to you. When you free that energy to be available, you find you're more awake. It's not a matter of just fighting with the problem through willpower, but of recognizing what's happening. Then you can be aware of the wandering mind and the breathing, because this energy has been freed.

And this is how we can work with all these so-called Hindrances. When we're able to access them and be more receptive to them, the energy which before was used to suppress or deny them becomes freely available. We have a free source of energy here. This may sound a bit odd, because normally we believe we shouldn't have the Hindrances, we should get rid of them. But that again is using some of our energy to struggle with what's really going on in our minds. And the struggling doesn't actually resolve the problem; it's still there and we're just wasting energy in trying to suppress it. However, we can instead become more aware of these mental states and learn to investigate these aspects of our being, rather than trying to deny them. Then we can tap into this energy and transform the Hindrances into a source of wisdom.

Spiritual wisdom is a source of energy. It is not a compulsive, driving, willpower energy, but a living vitality. That was what I recognized in Ajahn Chah, a peaceful vitality. He didn't have to run around doing things, accomplishing things and enlightening people. Indeed, he didn't have to do anything; he was just himself, just body and mind with awareness and wisdom. He had vitality but not compulsiveness, he wasn't driven by self-will.

There is also a danger side to energy, of course, when it is harnessed into the service of the ego as inflation. Thus some people who are

exceedingly energetic may be driven by self-aggrandizing forces. This kind of energy can be impressive, but narrow-mindedness and on-a-mission enthusiasm are usually lurking beneath the surface. When energy is not well-balanced by the other Factors of Awakening, especially the more calming ones such as tranquillity, concentration and equanimity, it can easily be mistaken as an end in itself.

RIGHT EFFORT

Probably the clearest explanation of right energy is in the Eightfold Path, where this quality of energy is explained as the four right efforts – putting forth effort, but in the right way. We can generate all kinds of energy, but where does it go? Maybe it even inclines towards being an obstacle, just making us more restless. And maybe we put energy in the wrong place, focus or channel it in the wrong direction. I'm sure people who are out to make a million dollars are very energetic too. So what is right effort? Its four different aspects are refraining from the unwholesome, putting away the already arisen unwholesome, developing the wholesome and maintaining the wholesome.

The first aspect is avoiding unwholesome actions. Of course, we need to know what is unwholesome. In part we can be guided by the Buddha's teachings. The Buddhist scriptures explain the ten wholesome courses of action as refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, malicious speech, harsh speech, gossip, covetousness, ill-will and wrong view. That is a very good start. However, we need to be able to apply this teaching to our own particular life and cultural situations. The scriptures suggest that the best way to refrain from the unwholesome is to guard the senses, so that covetousness, dejection and evil and unwholesome thoughts do not flow in. Thus we can be aware that they are just sense impressions which may sometimes trigger off perceptions and thoughts. If mindfulness and investigation of dhamma are well

enough established we are not moved to act on these impressions in an unwholesome way, and thus do not increase unwholesome results.

An example of this which may be a little controversial has to do with intoxicants. In our Western society alcohol is considered as OK, it's not bad to have a little drink – or maybe even a big drink. Alcohol is not necessarily looked upon as an unwholesome thing, except when taken to excess. However, when we are serious about avoiding unwholesome actions, we may recognize that any sort of intoxication or artificial altering of mood is not a very skilful thing. We should know what the principle of cause and effect, action and result, is telling us. The Buddha emphasizes that kamma is actually *intentional* action. So we must look at our intentions, and this may require some careful observation. Do we know our intentions in drinking alcohol? Do we take intoxicants to distract us from our misery? Does this really work? Or is there maybe a better alternative?

The second of the four right efforts is to be able to let go of, overcome, abandon unwholesome actions. Most specifically, continually dispelling thoughts of sensuality, ill-will and cruelty is mentioned. As we may know, thinking in certain ways can become habitual, and may then become a behavioural tendency which is hard to undo. If we can look carefully at what is motivating our behaviour, perhaps we can see what the thoughts or attitudes behind it are so that we can work to transform them.

In practical terms, of course, many of us have a range of behaviours which we might consider unwholesome. Sometimes we may be required to consider some very creative ways of dealing with them. A monk I knew in Thailand was an exemplary teacher for people with problems. Once a man addicted to drinking came to seek his advice. He suggested that the man stop drinking at least one day a week on his birthday. In Thailand each person's name is determined by the day of the week on which they are born, and thus that day is

special for them. So the man made a special effort to refrain from drinking on his birthday. After some weeks he could manage this well and came to the monk to report. The monk congratulated him and then suggested that he refrain from drinking on the following day as well. The man managed to do this successfully. Then as his confidence grew, and with constant encouragement from his monk teacher, he was eventually able to refrain from drinking on every day of the week.

The third of the right efforts is to develop wholesome actions. The Pali word for 'develop' is also the word used to translate 'meditation'; thus real development is through meditation. Most specifically, it is stated as developing the Seven Factors of Awakening. Not only are these Factors wholesome in themselves, but their cultivation can alleviate the effects of some of the unwholesome habits and tendencies which we may have accumulated.

The fourth right effort is to maintain a suitable meditation object. Since the roots of many of our unwholesome attitudes are due to unskilful states of mind, the way to uproot those attitudes is through meditation practice. I think the really important part of meditation practice is continuity. If we just practise when we're inspired or when we need some comfort, our practice is quite limited. What really matters is the continuity of it.

Being able to continue to develop and maintain wholesome actions requires us to investigate and carefully study what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. Some people may find it much easier to think in terms of what's good and what's evil. For me that's a little too black and white, and is often infused with cultural values. Considering what is wholesome and unwholesome is more subjective, because it means you have to decide how your actions measure up to where you are in spiritual practice. And your perception of wholesome and unwholesome can change. Just refraining from intoxicants may be a wholesome action in the beginning, but later on it may not be

enough. Developing meditation may then become the wholesome action, and then maintaining meditation practice may become even more wholesome, more skilful. So our standards of what is wholesome or unwholesome change as we reach different levels of experience, as we gain understanding and wisdom. Being able to understand what is wholesome and unwholesome gives us the right channel for this quality of energy in spiritual practice, energy based upon wisdom.

CONCLUSION

This theme of energy is very fundamental to the Buddha's teachings. It also brings us very close to what the nature of our self is, through observing this willpower to selfhood. But if we begin to see what the nature of this energy is, what this self-power is, we also begin to see what's fuelling the grasping of selfhood. Only when that fuel is eliminated does grasping at selfhood lose its power over us. If we're still being driven by willpower, even though we may realize moments of clarity and concentration, we haven't yet realized what is supporting selfhood.

So we investigate the nature of energy – the nature of energy in the body and in the mind, what stimulates it, what depletes it, its basis. Is it goal-oriented or ego-supported, or is it natural, open and free-flowing? Is it open to all aspects of our experience, or are we energized only when stimulated by what the self chooses to focus on?

How much are we being energized by our beliefs? Some people have fixed ideas about what enlightenment is, or what spiritual practice is. Often their fixed ideas are still being supported by their selfhood – me and enlightenment too. Maybe we need these fixed ideas to some degree as incentives, a little carrot to lead us onward. But ideally we should see that this carrot is just a technique, a method

for deepening practice. If we see what is motivating us, we can then try to investigate what's behind it. Do we really need stimulation all the time? If so, our practice is quite limited, because sometimes the stimulation won't be there. However, we do have the possibility to investigate the nature of energy and eventually return to what is powering or motivating us. And to what is behind, outside and beyond the self.

This quality of energy is the basis of the principle of kamma, or ethical cause and effect, because we're acting all the time, we're putting our energy all over the place in different ways. Until we know where we're directing our energy, we won't recognize what its effect is. Is it really wholesome? Is it really beneficial for ourselves and others. Is it in harmony with the way things really are? Is it leading to liberation?

4 JOY

MEDITATION

Take up a comfortable sitting position, keeping the back upright.

Begin by bringing attention to the body as it sits, becoming aware of the sensations which make up our experience of body.

Next we bring attention to the sensation of natural breathing. Is it flowing freely and easefully. If not perhaps take a few deep inhalations and exhalations to expand the lungs, and then allow the breathing to return to a natural rhythm.

Now, for a moment return attention to the sensation of body. Do you notice any sensation which has a pleasant feeling tone? If you are aware of such a pleasant feeling tone, is there any response to it in the body? Is the body relaxed with it or tense with it?

Now bring attention back to the breathing again, and then for a moment take it back again to the pleasant feeling tone. Do you notice any response in the mind related to that pleasant feeling tone? Observe whether the mind is drawn to it or recoils from it. Does it trigger off any particular thoughts or memories? Then go back to focusing attention on the breathing once again.

Again for a moment bring attention back to that pleasant feeling tone. See if you can settle your attention on it as a meditation object. Observe how much you can open to it, abide with it, settle into it. What does this do for the calming of the mind or focusing of attention?

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This chapter's theme is joy. The word 'joy' is my translation of the Pali word *pīti*. Normally it's translated as 'rapture', but rapture may sound a bit too exotic or exalted. Rapture is similar to 'ecstasy' – using that word might attract a different set of readers or listeners! Using the translation 'joy', I think, makes it more accessible. But of course, *pīti* is not limited just to the ordinary, everyday experience of joy, like getting your pay cheque at the end of the month. Rather, it refers to a spiritual joy, a joy arising from a spiritual or religious experience. It may have a sense of being an 'other-worldly' experience. Although perhaps triggered by some sense impression, it is not dependent upon the senses as most normal happiness is.

While the word *pīti* appears most frequently in the scriptures in relation to the development of the meditative absorptions (*jhāna*),[1] it is also mentioned in other contexts. For example, in one discourse it is causally related to faith,[2] and in another discourse it is causally related to morality;[3] in a third it arises from a deep experience of the Buddha's teaching.[4] These passages follow a stock causal formula: morality leads to freedom from remorse, which leads to gladness, to joy, to tranquillity, to happiness, to concentration. The scriptures state that these qualities are all causally linked to one another. Thus joy follows on from energy in the Seven Factors of Awakening. When energy has arisen and is flowing very freely and spontaneously, this can be the cause of the arising of joy, rapture, or bliss. And

1 More information concerning the jhānas is given in the chapter on Concentration.
2 SN II,30.
3 Aṅguttara Nikayā (AN) V,1.
4 AN III, 21.

when you see this result and experience this profound joy, you're more convinced of the benefits of the other factors, like energy or mindfulness. You do the practices of developing mindfulness, investigation of dhamma and energy, and then a little joy arises. You have obtained the results. You get some reward for your work. It's the beginning of seeing some results in your practice.

There are various degrees of this, of course.[5] The first degree may be like experiencing some strong pleasant feeling. So if you followed the meditation instructions I gave at the beginning of the chapter, you may have noticed that a kind of feedback happens. If one attends to pleasant feeling, one may begin to feel good about the pleasant feeling, and so on. This gives one a sense of what rapture or joy might be like. However, *pīti* as defined in the Buddhist scriptures is not actually a 'feeling' (in the Buddhist definition), but a condition of mind, a specialized state of mind – something exalted. It is related, however, to the three feelings, pleasant, unpleasant and neutral. Those are the most fundamental feeling tones; then various conditions of mind build upon them. Sometimes, for example, when you have had no pleasant feeling for a while, and then a pleasant experience comes along, it can be startling – oh, *eureka* – happiness is still there! The new experience of pleasant feeling stands out in comparison to the previous unpleasant feeling, and so it can be quite thrilling and make you exuberant. You can get quite a charge out of it – until you realize you are still your old self. But for a moment you have experienced pleasant feeling in a different way.

I think all of us have experienced joy at some time in life. A number of Thai people, for example, have said that they experience joy when making offerings at the monastery. In the beginning it may

5 Visuddhimagga (Vism) 134: five degrees are mentioned, from "slight" which "only raises the hairs of the neck", to "rapturous". Vism 143 also outlines eleven causes for its development: any of the seven recollections on: 1) the Buddha, 2) the Dhamma, 3) the Sangha, 4) virtue, 5) generosity, 6) deities, 7) peace; then, 8) avoidance of rough persons, 9) cultivation of refined persons, 10) reviewing encouraging discourse, 11) resoluteness on joy.

be just a little joy, such as a tingling sensation on the back of your neck. Later it may be an exhilarating rush of energy, a feeling of bliss pulsing very quickly through the body. At a very advanced stage one can dwell in this state and bathe the whole body in bliss and rapture. One has a certain amount of control over it, and one's cells can even become charged up and invigorated by it. Of course, this is a very powerful experience, which can even be a bit detrimental to some people – they may start believing that this is the whole point of meditation and become attached to bliss. (I suppose that's a little better than just being attached to sore knees, although it's more difficult to let go of that bliss than to let go of sore knees).

The role of joy in meditation results from the Buddha's own experience. He came from the religious tradition of India, in which one of the main practices was mortification – people would try all kinds of ascetic practices, believing that in this way they would burn off their attachment to the world and free their spirit. The Buddha practised asceticism for the greater part of six years, and he became so exhausted that one day he just collapsed. There's a very impressive sculpture of the 'fasting Buddha', in the Lahore museum in Pakistan (although it's not quite right to say that he was the Buddha then; it was before his Awakening). It shows dramatically just how emaciated he became. Having practiced asceticism in this way, he felt that it wasn't the right path; it wasn't the right direction. So he ate some food and sat down under the Bodhi tree, where he began to contemplate where his practice was going. And he remembered a time when he was a young child and his father, a tribal chief, was attending some ceremony and left him sitting under a tree. With no one to amuse or distract him, he dropped into a deep state of blissful concentration. Perhaps you can identify with that. Perhaps at some time in your childhood when you were very contented, without any worries, you sat down and 'blissed out'. It is possible to experience these states of selfless bliss – they're inherently there within us, but we spoil them by grasping them as part of the self or ego.

When the Buddha remembered that childhood experience, the thought arose –– 'Maybe this is the way. Rather than asceticism, I should try to follow this way of blissful concentration.' And he reflected that this pleasure was not worldly pleasure. This joy was not due to sensuality, like having eaten some good food, or some similar experience. He realized that this innate state of blissful concentration wasn't in any way dangerous or an obstacle. This experience later became formulated into the *jhānas* or absorptions, where attention becomes totally absorbed into a meditation object, with accompanying qualities of bliss and energy. So with a tranquil, calm and serene body and mind, the Buddha contemplated the nature of suffering, impermanence and conditionality. And through this contemplation he attained awakening. There was a combination of deep calm, deep bliss and tranquillity of mind, and also a contemplation of Dhamma, resulting in the awareness of truth. And with that he realized awakening and recognized that this was the Way.

After this he approached his spiritual colleagues, who had also been practising asceticism and had previously given up on him, thinking – 'This guy's a slacker – he's eating food. He's given up his ascetic practices.' But when he met his colleagues they were impressed by his serene complexion, sensing that perhaps he was indeed someone special. When he began to teach them, he emphasized that this joy he had discovered was not the ordinary worldly joy, rapture or bliss, but belonged to a different dimension altogether.

Besides the joy arising from the meditative absorptions, another source of joy is mentioned in the Discourse on Transcendental Dependent Arising, [6] which is a detailed description of the psychological origination of suffering, broken down into twelve

6 Upanisā Sutta, SN.II,30; see Wheel Publication #277/8. This translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi, followed by a detailed commentary, is now available on www.accesstoinsight.com. A translation of this important text may also be found in Bhikkhu Bodhi's complete translation of SN,pp. 553-556.

factors. Rather than just ending with suffering or rebirth, this analysis goes on to describe how one can actually end that cyclical process. This teaching says that suffering leads to faith. For example, when people experience some difficulty, some dis-ease, they either become very confused while trying to find a solution to their pain, or they incline towards seeking a spiritual solution to it. Some people may just seek a material solution by taking a pain-killer. Everybody has their own particular solution, and some people seek a spiritual one.

In the teaching it is said that when the Buddha came across old age, sickness and death, he asked, 'What's the way out of this?' And then he came across a spiritual seeker and thought, 'Maybe that's the way out.' And that's the path he chose. So this possibility arises for some people, sometimes quite naturally. When I first came across the teaching on suffering, I was relieved – here was someone who was talking about the truth. He was not just talking about Love and Light all the time, he was telling us the way it is. At least, that's the way it was for me. But he wasn't just telling us that life is suffering; he was presenting a solution too, like going to the doctor and being given both a diagnosis of the ailment and a remedy for it. So the Buddha gave us the way out of suffering as well.

When I went travelling after reading a book about Buddhism, I visited many countries where religion was fundamental to the culture. Although different countries had different cultures, it seemed to me that religion was behind them all. And then I went to Thailand, a Buddhist country where they talk about suffering quite openly, and I noticed that the people were often smiling. So I thought, 'Hmmm, are these people being false or what?' It's interesting that statistically Thailand is the most Buddhist country in the world, and it's called the Land of Smiles. One might assume that the people should be really miserable, contemplating old age, sickness, death and painful meditation – and yet they were smiling

much of the time! I couldn't quite understand this at first. But one day I spoke to one of the elderly men who came to the monastery very often. He was a reformed alcoholic, too old to become a monk, and now spent his time helping out every morning at the monastery, making 'good kamma'. One morning I came back from almsround and happened to meet him. He wasn't looking very cheerful, so to make conversation I asked, 'How are you doing?' He said, 'Oh, I'm suffering', and then he laughed. I was very surprised. He continued, 'Oh yes, I'm really feeling spiritual despair.' And then a big smile lit up his face!

I realized it was almost paradoxical that these Buddhist people could both recognize suffering and then just smile at it, whereas my experience in the West was that nearly everyone ignores suffering. They all know it's there, permeating the whole of society, but everybody tries to ignore it. And it's so heavy trying to keep this demon hidden away, trying to hide this 'elephant in the room'! Everybody tiptoes around, not wanting to mention it. You don't talk about death, you don't talk about disease – and as a result people aren't very joyful. Actually, they're very heavy-hearted, because they know that suffering might spill out at any minute – at any minute someone might die or fall sick. But in Thailand people could access suffering more readily, and it's mentioned all the time. The monastery where I stayed was a cremation site for the local village, and it's interesting that although cremations are sad events, the sadness is not really *heavy*. There's a lightness about them. People come to them, they cry, but then they let the grief go and move on. People aren't afraid of it, though I must admit things have changed nowadays.

So it is possible to open to this reality of life, rather than making it some kind of hidden secret. When we can be really receptive to suffering, more of a natural flow occurs in the heart. It means acknowledging that this is life, whereas by trying to resist it we're

going against the flow of life, we're trying to deny it. That may perhaps make us feel more comfortable in a way, but it's a heavy comfort rather than a light one.

It's paradoxical that people who live so close to death and have so few modern conveniences to buffer them from the realities of nature can be more equanimous than many others who have more comfort and shelter. And there's a certain kind of joy about their approach. It's not like the exciting joy of having a party, but it's a joyfulness that has a light-heartedness to it, there's a spontaneity and a lightness, an acknowledgment that this is the way it is. And one can then flow with the way it is, rather than fighting against it all the time. So once this intrinsic joy becomes more recognized for what it is, a natural aspect of our life, we can give it more emphasis. We can have more lightness in our lives.

This is very important with regard to spiritual practice, because that is a 'serious' matter, isn't it? It's about enlightenment – either we're enlightened before we die, or we aren't. With this kind of attitude spiritual life can become too serious. If one has a goal-oriented attitude where one is using willpower and thinking thoughts like, 'I've got to get enlightened', and so on, practice becomes just another means of reinforcing the self. But when we recognize this element of joyful light-heartedness, it allows us to flow with things. When results are happening in our practice, this may give a sense of joy, but even when results aren't occurring one can still open up and recognize that this is the way it is. There are just ups and downs, like day and night, summer and winter and so on. And then the downs are no longer such an obstacle or perceived as a failure, but are just part of a wider picture.

I think this is quite a significant point to contemplate, because normally so much emphasis is placed on suffering. Isn't it good to know that the Buddha points out that joy is a Factor of Awakening? There is some resolution, some solution – it's not just going to be

suffering all the way to the end! Maybe that's how it starts off, but if you hang in there you may get a breakthrough.

This is not to say that you have to suffer in order to meditate, as in the saying, 'You have to suffer to sing the blues'! If there's too much suffering in our practice it may just make us exhausted and confused. It's more to do with the right way of *viewing* suffering. The right perspective on it, the right contemplation of it, can give rise to faith. And we can intuit that yes, there have been people, such as the Buddha, who have found the way out of suffering. This is an elementary form of faith that we can put into practice, in order to find out for ourselves. We walk the path ourselves and then achieve some results. Faith can lead to the clearing of doubt.

When I was young and confused and suffering, I heard the Buddha's teaching and it was like a glimmer of light. But there was no opportunity to put it into practice – in Vancouver thirty-five years ago there were only books, but no teachers. It was only when I went to Sri Lanka and Thailand and began to meditate that the teaching could become more a part of my own experience. Initially it was only possible to experience moments of 'less suffering' (usually just after the meal, actually, especially at the meditation monastery in Sri Lanka, where they had sumptuous banquets)! But through spending many hours meditating, every once in a while my mind did go quiet. So I began to feel that realizing the teachings was possible. I had some personal experience. It wasn't easy by any means, but it was possible. And so the initial faith became more like confidence. I knew for myself that the teachings did work, and a certain amount of peace arose with this, a certain amount of gladness. If this process continues, a more powerful joy or rapture can come out if it. And then this feeds back to our faith again.

But it's still important to keep in mind that joy is just one factor in the whole sequence of cause and effect, so we shouldn't fixate on the idea that joy is the answer leading to awakening. All the

Factors of Awakening are interconnected. When we initially develop mindfulness and investigate the nature of some of the experiences that come up for us, energy arises, and then a certain amount of joy arises with it. I'm sure you know for yourself what that is. But do you recognize it in the right context? Maybe some people think, 'Oh, this is pleasure now, I shouldn't enjoy this. I might get addicted to it.' But that experience is a Factor of Awakening.

I talk in a rather mundane way about what I call the 'Pleasure Principle', which may be a bit controversial in the Buddhist context. But it's not against the five precepts! I came up with this concept in the context of people coming off retreats in Switzerland, where many people have very busy lives which are very much controlled by the clock, so they usually think they've got to sit by the clock. But it's not quite the same when it comes to meditation practice. Maybe in a group you can endure some of the discomfort of sitting, because you get a sense of group support. You don't want to disturb your friends, you're all in this together. But when you're sitting by yourself, just going by the clock may be too regimented, and maybe also a bit too egotistical. At the end of your set period you can say, 'I've done it. I've sat my forty minutes.'. We could have meditation clock-in cards, you could just clock in with the knowledge that you've done your half an hour of meditation for the day – look at this, you can check my card! And then the next thing you know, we'll have a meditators' Olympics!

So I suggested that when people went back to their ordinary lives they should sit just as long as they felt good about it, as long as they felt pleasant about it. There's a psychological principle in this. Most people sit to the point where they can't bear the pain anymore, and then they stop. But then their last memory of meditation is pain, so when the next time for meditation comes they think, 'Oh, gee whiz, maybe I should try something else, take guitar lessons, or something!' However, if you sit just as long as you feel comfortable about it, your last memory of meditation is pleasant, and you want to

do it again. Our body and mind are tuned to the pleasure principle. If you enjoy something you do it again. If it's painful, you only want to do it again if you're a masochist.

So maybe the Buddha knew about this psychology two and a half thousand years ago, and brought joy in as a Factor of Awakening because of it. He encouraged the cultivation of that quality. The Buddha knew that if people aren't receiving some joy, some pleasure from their meditation exercises, maybe they won't continue, or maybe the exercises will turn into self-mortification again. But he was teaching the Middle Way between self-mortification and self-indulgence, and in his view this particular joy is not a 'worldly pleasure', so it is outside those two extremes. One can develop joy by noticing the feedback that occurs with pleasant feeling, asking what it does to you and thus becoming more relaxed. Apart from the physiological effects, this approach can create very positive conditions in the mind, which can be useful channels for developing concentration. Concentration isn't so much about developing will-power, but rather about attuning more to the natural peaceful tendencies of the mind. We all have concentration to a certain degree. It's the primary attribute underlying any condition of mind. It's not just a matter of creating it out of thin air; but rather of giving attention to what is already there; emphasizing it, and being able to develop it in a more natural way.

And it's the same with joy. When we recognize what effects it can have on our body and mind, we give it more emphasis. There's a feedback loop. And you may notice that the mind becomes more tranquil. The other side of this is that if you are experiencing unpleasant feeling, the mind has the tendency to close, to become tense and tighten up. Maybe this triggers off a lot of fear of pain, of one's past traumas, etc., and then the body becomes more distraught, more tense. Not a very good state for developing concentration. It may be a kind of concentration, but it's based on fear, rejection and denial rather than openness, rapture or joy.

So if we recognize what this quality of joy is in our daily lives and our meditation practice, we can begin to have an understanding of what conditions support it and lead to its increase and development, and also what is detrimental to it, what disturbs it and what destroys it. For example, when we try to control it and hold on to it, it's like the 'butterfly complex', when you see a butterfly and think, oh that's nice! I like it, I want it! – and then you grab it – and crush it. We can do that to joy, too. It's a very delicate quality – if we try to grab it, try to hold it, try to maintain it, we can end up crushing and killing it. So joy calls for a certain amount of receptivity. It's like spontaneity. Can you *try* to be spontaneous? 'Let's be spontaneous'! It's impossible to make spontaneity, it just happens. And similarly with this quality of joy; it's there innately, and if you give it some emphasis it can become more prominent. So as a Factor of Awakening it's accessible to all of us, but on the other hand it is also a Factor to be *developed*. And we can see the value it has in developing all the other qualities of awakening as well.

5 TRANQUILLITY

MEDITATION

Take up a comfortable sitting position, keeping the back upright.

We begin by bringing attention to the body sitting, sensing into the body, becoming aware of the sensation of body as it sits. If there are any places of discomfort or dis-ease, we relax or relieve them as much as possible.

Next we bring attention to the sensation of natural breathing, wherever it is most obvious. How do we connect with that breathing process? Is it clear and obvious, or perhaps faint and distant? When we notice our attention wandering, we gently and patiently turn the attention back to the sensation of breathing once again.

Now for a moment return attention to the bodily sensations. Is the body relaxed and easeful? Is it tense or restless? Is there some way to make it more relaxed, calm or tranquil? Then go back to focusing attention on breathing once again.

For a moment bring attention to the state of the mind right now. Is it active or tranquil? If the mind is active, be with the awareness of that activity. Is the awareness active or tranquil? If the mind

seems to be tranquil, what kind is it? Is it clear? Is it dull or cloudy? Check this tranquillity in relation to the body. Is there some place in particular where tranquillity is centred?

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Our subject here is the quality of tranquillity. The first Factors of Awakening are more active qualities, but with this one they start to become more passive. The last three are more calming factors.

The usual experience for most people is to come across the Buddha's teachings, or teachings about meditation in general, and begin practising. With some careful guidance and perseverance they may achieve some results, such as understanding, energy and perhaps joy. Joy may seem a good enough result – at least on the emotional level, it's a reward. But this isn't the end of it. It may occur to people who have experienced some degree of energy and joy that these qualities are a bit on the coarse side. They can incline towards restlessness and even agitation – being agitated by joy may not be so bad, but it's still a kind of agitation. Some people just want to 'bliss-out' when they meditate, but in the Buddhist scheme of things this isn't the end of the meditation process. The Buddha did recognize the value of positive qualities such as joy, but when we realize they are coarse we may incline towards developing tranquillity, a sense of containment and balance to add to the more exciting and energetic qualities. In the Eightfold Path the factors are explained as 'right' – we have to find the right measure.

There are many kinds of tranquillity. If we observe the conditions of body and mind in terms of tranquillity, at the end of a meditation for example, we may notice how the body has changed in the course of sitting. And we can recognize different degrees of tranquillity. Some of them are perhaps not particularly helpful or supportive of meditation practice. Sometimes tranquillity can be very heavy, close to sleepiness or dullness. Tranquillity is present, but not many of the other Factors are – not much energy, not much awareness. So it

is important to develop each Factor in the context of all the others. They have to be based upon a good foundation of mindfulness, so that we can know them in the widest sense. The Buddha emphasized the need to recognize when the Factors arise, when they aren't there, what supports their arising and how they can be further developed.[1]

It is significant that the factor of tranquillity comes after the development of energy, most particularly when we have become aware of our natural energy rather than just the energy of willpower. By then giving attention to tranquillity, we may note that despite a certain degree of tranquillity of body and mind, there is perhaps still some internal tension. This is often a habitual form of wilfulness; there is still a sort of striving, a drive, an urge, so that it isn't easy for the body or the mind to be really, deeply tranquil. Thus it can be useful to see tranquillity in terms of an easeful, exhilarating relaxation which is still buoyed by a balanced and persevering energy.

It seems that many people come to meditation because they are seeking some sort of tranquillity as an aim or a goal. But this aim can easily be misdirected and end as a kind of suppression. We may try to achieve calmness by suppressing the natural tendencies of the body and the conditions of the mind. If we are disturbed by particular conditions of mind, can we be receptive to them, more aware of them, or do we usually react by turning away from them, pushing away, resisting? For example, if there is a lot of noise in the room, do we have to get away from it, or can we just shift our awareness? If we can turn our attention inward, the noise may still be there but we don't need to be disturbed by it. We can realize an inner tranquillity rather than looking for it on the external level. This usually takes some practice. Developed tranquillity is not just the tranquillity of no disturbance. It's a fuller kind of tranquillity, a tranquillity within disturbance. Some people only recognize tranquillity in terms of the absence of disturbances, but this is a

1 Satipatthāna Sutta (MN.I,62; DN.II,304-5).

minor kind of tranquillity. Real tranquillity comes in the midst of disturbance, in the midst of stress. If we can maintain tranquillity then, that's real tranquillity. It's tranquillity in the proactive sense, as a Factor of Awakening.

There are many supportive conditions for the development of tranquillity. A wholesome lifestyle through practising skilful conduct in body, speech and mind is a very important foundation. Otherwise one may feed disturbing influences into the body and mind, and they will inevitably have disturbing effects. So if we find that it is hard for us to establish a level of tranquillity or calm, we may have to look at our way of living and consider whether some changes may be beneficial. We may only realize this when we try to develop a deeper experience of tranquillity.

Another factor that is supportive for the development of tranquillity is what is called, 'restraint of the senses'. In Buddhism this includes the mind, as one aspect of mind is its function as a sense organ. 'Restraining the senses' means that we place awareness at the doors of the six senses, so that we can understand what effect sense impressions have on us. We can see how we are stimulated by certain sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts, which sense impressions support tranquillity and which stimulate disturbance. The Buddha recognized the tranquil aspects of living in the forest, for example. And that was the forest in India, which probably wasn't very tranquil, with wild tigers and whizzing mosquitoes! But in general living in a forest is inherently calming. The green of vegetation and the blue of the sky are very soothing colours, whereas if you go into the city you'll notice that there are not so many green-coloured signs – signs are usually red and yellow, jumping out at you. Thus they stir up the senses, which is what they are supposed to do to attract your attention. Sometimes I find even walking around city streets very exhausting. All the sensory input can be quite overwhelming. One can definitely notice the difference

when in the forest. So if we're aware of the effects that various sense impressions have upon us, we can choose soothing sights, soothing sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and maybe even soothing thoughts. Some people might even use a certain thought like 'peace' in meditation. If many disturbing thoughts arise in practice, breathing may not be very helpful, but perhaps the skilful use of a word can help to calm the mind and create an initially peaceful mental atmosphere.

There are also meditations on colours, which can affect people differently. A Cambodian monk who was an expert on these colour meditations came to visit Chithurst monastery many years ago. A couple of monks were having problems with sleepiness and he recommended that they focus on the colour yellow, so they went into a room with yellow lights. After about ten minutes one of the monks came out and said, 'I can't stand it any more! It's too much already – I'm buzzing!' And that was after just ten minutes. For the development of tranquillity, blue or green are recommended. So we may sometimes need to emphasize the supportive conditions for tranquillity in our practice, rather than just waiting for it to happen to us, for our busy mind to stop busying.

Sometimes it may help to give some attention to the bodily conditions so as to realize a deeper level of tranquillity. When I was in England many years ago, we had a two-month retreat in the winter. On these retreats we did a lot of sitting and walking. My own personal situation is that my mind likes to sit, but my body doesn't – it starts to tense up, it needs to move. One of the monks had learned some Tai Chi exercises when he was a layman, and offered to give us some lessons after tea, before the evening sitting. Normally this was the time when I would have a rest, but it was the only time he could do it, and as it turned out these sessions were even more relaxing than resting. By focusing attention and relaxing into these particular bodily movements, the mind was able to relax too. So

there was a direct relationship between the tension in the body and the lack of calm and relaxation in the mind. Thus giving some attention to these exercises can be a good support for both the body and the mind.

On retreats I have met people who talk about having difficulty sitting, and usually I recommend that they do some kind of body-work – any kind of physical exercise, actually. I met one person whose job was to write books for a chemical company in Basel. He sat at a desk preparing these journals all day long. When he went home to do sitting meditation his body was jumping around all over the place. He was in his head throughout the day, and when he came to sit, his body was displacing his mental tensions.

So bodily and mental tranquillity are inter-related. Sometimes it's not even very helpful to distinguish between the two. For example, when one is able to focus more attention on calming the breathing, this can feed back into the body, which becomes more tranquil as the mind becomes more tranquil. One of the exercises in the mindfulness of breathing practice is to 'tranquillize the breath body'. So we can take this as a theme and observe. We can ask what is supporting this tranquillity; this serenity or stillness. And perhaps on a retreat we may have a deeper experience of tranquillity or serenity, something which we would not normally experience in our ordinary life. Then confidence that we can cultivate and develop it arises. In a way, being able to experience a deeper level of tranquillity enables a breaking up of some of our habitual tensions, holding patterns and resistance, to allow for a new way of being.

Of course, if we over-emphasize tranquillity it can lead to lethargy and dullness. So it is helpful to have energy first, as laid out in the sequence of the Factors of Awakening. It seems that many people in the West want to go to tranquillity first, before energy. If our life is very stressful and busy we can think, 'Oh, I need more tranquillity.' And at that particular time in our lives it may be a helpful contrast.

If we're always multi-tasking in our daily lives, some tranquillity is useful – but that's not the end of it. It is important to be aware when our practice is inclining towards lethargy and dullness.

In the monastery in Thailand the weather was often tranquillizing enough – to become tranquil you only had to wait for the hot season. So there was more emphasis on developing energy, particularly when we were required to follow the discipline of the daily routine. However, when we are practising on our own it is useful to be more vigilant about how the meditation exercises are affecting our energy levels. For many working people it may be more helpful to do walking meditation rather than just sitting, especially since so many jobs these days are sedentary already. Developing walking meditation helps to put us in touch with the body, with sensations and physical energy. On one level it's somewhat coarse, but it can also help to arouse more natural embodied energy, and the concentration developed can lead to increased calmness of mind and body. Then we may realize more balance in our practice, rather than following our ideas about what we think tranquillity is or should be.

Interestingly, many of the Forest meditation masters in Thailand practised much walking meditation. A student of one of Ajahn Chah's disciples opened a new monastery in North Thailand. His teacher visited the monastery and commented that the monks up there were all very lazy – there were no walking meditation paths at the monastery! When I was in North Thailand I stayed in a monastery where there was a very long walking path. I used to enjoy doing a lot of walking. It was in a very remote area – there was no electricity, not even flashlights. One night I leaned out of the door of my raised hut and spotted a snake just beginning to climb up the pillar of the hut. The local wisdom is that if the snake does not flee, then you should flee. It was obviously a poisonous one, so it was a lot safer to sit in my hut at night. I did lots of walking meditation during the daytime, but at night I'd sit. I found that if I didn't do so much walking meditation during the day, I couldn't sit peacefully for so long at night.

Tranquillity is not developed just through passivity, some kind of 'not doing', but as something proactive. It means being tranquil *with* energy. Can you imagine tranquillized energy? Or energized tranquillity? Tranquillity as a Factor of Awakening is actually a very positive quality, it's not just a by-product of sitting still. Sometimes people want to imitate it; they want to be really calm or 'cool', but more often they're just forcing tranquillity through suppression. Tranquillity which is rigid or lethargic is not tranquillity as a Factor of Awakening; more likely it is a supporting factor of wilful selfhood. As an Awakening Factor tranquillity is developed in the context of mindfulness, energy and joy, so that it does not become an end in itself.

Some people may wonder, why go any further if you've got clarity and joy? But is this really complete? If one doesn't grasp at any condition or thirst after it, but can be tranquil with it, the experience is much more supportive of awakening. If it is just a temporarily-induced, superficial mood, one becomes excited and wants more of it. This only leads to agitation and restlessness. A truly deep and authentic experience of clear, energized, joyful tranquillity is recognized as a breakthrough, to a new way of seeing the condition of the developed mind which is capable of realizing awakening.

We could even say that serene, easeful tranquillity is our natural state. If we can disengage from agitation of body and churning thoughts in the mind, what is left? Behind them are a natural tranquillity and stillness. In the scriptures, all the thoughts that come into the mind are called visitors; they just come and then go. They aren't the host, they aren't the natural state. They aren't the person who owns the home, but rather the visitors who come into it. But how many of us are able to allow our visitors to go? You may think, 'What will I be without my thoughts? I'll be lonely, I'll be ...' But you'll be tranquil too! Actually, we wouldn't be lonely – we would have a natural joy, and a natural tranquillity as well. It would be

like returning to our home, a place of safety and security which we could enjoy. Otherwise we just identify with our thoughts and think they're some kind of ultimate reality which we have to clear away to achieve tranquillity. But tranquillity is the natural state. When we recognize that thoughts are just visitors that arise in the mind and then pass away, we can let them go and tranquillity is there.

There are three other qualities which are very supportive of developing tranquillity and provide the right environment for the Factors of Awakening to develop to their fulfilment. They are seclusion, dispassion and cessation. People might think that seclusion means going far away from everything, but there are different kinds of seclusion. Seclusion from our busy mind is a more important kind of seclusion. To experience tranquillity, we turn away from the busy mind through the development of concentration; we step away from it and find a peaceful refuge from it.

Dispassion is the second quality. Most kinds of joy are associated with passion, with pleasure and liking. But if we develop the quality of dispassion, we can experience the peace beyond the passions, an unruffled calm with senses awake but unexcited. If we are struggling against the passions, we are still far from calm. Dispassion outgrows the passions through seeing their disturbing effects. Peace takes priority over passion through the deepening insight into unsatisfactoriness.

These qualities lead towards the third one, cessation. The development of mindfulness increasingly exposes the truth of impermanence, in particular by revealing more clearly the cessation of conditions. When we see that cessation is fundamental to life, we can open more to its influence. Thus the obstructions to tranquillity can be let go, released at ever-deepening levels, and the more we experience mindful, energized tranquillity, the more we become aware of subtler degrees of cessation.

So as our mind calms down, we become aware of different, more subtle states of mind, and this provides an extra support for awareness and investigation of dhamma. As the body and mind become calmer we begin to see them more sharply and truthfully. But if our tranquillity is more like suppression or switching off, it will not lead to increased awareness or seeing the way things are.

With practice we can become more aware of the various levels and kinds of tranquillity. In the early stages of practice we may find tranquillity rather elusive. We may think it's just a matter of being able to sit on the cushion for longer. However, by investigating it and what obstructs it, we can explore deeper levels of tranquillity and see how they influence our meditation practice. When we are able to experience a certain level of clear, energized tranquillity, we realize that although there are thoughts in the mind, they do not affect us because we are now tranquil inside as well. There's a deeper level of tranquillity which those thoughts don't disturb. They're just on the surface because our level of knowing is deeper, based upon clearer insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality. Things which used to disturb us are not an issue now because we have a different experience of calm, as the calm amid disturbances. Sometimes, even though our mind can be raging away, at the same time we feel a sense of dispassion. We can just be calm. With this deeper level of calm, we are no longer dragged so often into reacting to disturbances.

Each of us may be disturbed by a particular thing. We may be reasonably calm when the next-door neighbour plays his drums, but if somebody starts to chainsaw, we're off! I must admit I have my limitations. In my early years in Thailand I didn't find the loud Thai music played at the village fairs intrusive, because I couldn't understand it anyway, but when they started playing old 60's pop songs my mind would react. We each have our own limitations, but we can all keep developing tranquillity to ever-deeper levels. Keep noticing how you habitually react to disturbance. Do you try

to suppress it, distract yourself, or resist it? Instead, try to be more aware of that reactive process itself, investigate it and see if you can find a mode of being that is more tranquil *with* disturbance, rather than against it. Awareness of what disturbs tranquillity is the key to the development of tranquillity as a Factor of Awakening. With deepening insight into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality, we can release our holding of or resistance to these disturbances and experience greater tranquillity. And this development supports the increasing development of the other Factors – more calm leads to more awareness, to more balanced energy, to deeper levels of concentration and deeper levels of investigation. Thus the Factors of Awakening begin to gain momentum in our spiritual practice, and the possibility of awakening increases.

6 CONCENTRATION

MEDITATION

Taking up a comfortable sitting position, we bring attention to the body sitting here. We sense into the physicality of body, receiving it as it is. We notice the general condition of body at this time, and whether there are any places where there are strong sensations.

Then we bring attention to the breathing process at the nostrils and notice our relationship to this breathing. Do we connect with it easily, or is it somewhat faint and distant?

Notice how attentive we can be to the breathing. How far are we able to sustain attentiveness to it? We see if we can steadily and consistently follow the breathing process through its phases of inhalation to their end: a slight pause and then exhalation begins, continues, ends; a slight pause, and then inhalation begins again.

Now for a moment bring attention to the condition of mind. What degree of calm is there in the mind? Is this clear calm or dull calm? Is there interest in the calm or the busyness? As you sustain attentiveness on the breathing do you notice any change in the level of calm? Are any other mental conditions present with the calm?

This chapter is about concentration, one of the most important themes in the Buddha's teachings. 'Concentration' is a translation of the Pali word '*samādhi*'. Like mindfulness and energy it occurs in several of the different categories of the Buddha's teachings, in the Five Spiritual Faculties, the Five Spiritual Powers and the Eightfold Path.

Samādhi really encompasses various kinds of concentration. They range from a rudimentary form, which is present in all states of consciousness, to the very powerful concentration resulting in the states of absorption (*jhānas*). Concentration is quite a weak definition of the term *samādhi* when referring to the absorptions, since other noticeable factors such as mindfulness, joy, happiness and energy are also present in these states, while many of the usual mental disturbances, referred to as the Five Hindrances, are temporarily suspended. During my student years I tried not so successfully to concentrate on my studies. However, I lacked some important supportive qualities such as interest, and definitely joy and energy, and was often assailed by a variety of 'hindrances' such as sleepiness and restlessness. We all need some degree of concentration to be able to function effectively in life, and may temporarily become concentrated on something which attracts our attention, but often our concentration isn't supported by other qualities or doesn't extend to other areas of our life.

Right concentration is the last factor of the Eightfold Path. We could say there is wrong concentration too. I'm sure a skilled burglar has very strong concentration; he must be very concentrated to break into a house without being heard or seen, but that's not what Buddhism would call right concentration. Concentration is basically a neutral quality that can have both right and wrong aspects to it. Right concentration refers most specifically to the development of concentration to the very deep levels of the absorptions, the *jhanas*. This requires a considerable degree of ethical conduct and mental poise, undisturbed by distracting thoughts.

The development of concentration usually proceeds from an initial degree to 'approaching' (*upacara*) concentration, and then to 'attainment' (*appana*) concentration, the strong degree of concentration of the absorptions, which are designated in four basic levels. In simplified form they can be designated as follows.[1] The factors of the first absorption are *vitakka* (initial mental application), *vicāra* (sustained mental application), *pīti* (joy), *sukha* (happiness) and concentration (*samādhi*). That's all there is to it – no distractions, no disturbances, but some degree of mental activity is still going on. As absorption concentration develops it becomes more and more refined. Thus mental application falls away in the second absorption, and in the third joy falls away; just happiness and concentration remain. And finally, in the fourth absorption even happiness is seen as a bit coarse and falls away, leaving just equanimity and concentration. So we could say that as this more and more refined concentration is developed, the coarser aspects of selfhood fall away, and there is a predominance of more purified states of mind which are less involved with selfhood. Equanimity is a very refined state of mind, whereas in happiness there's still choice or liking, and with joy there's not only liking, but some exuberance too.

Supporting the development of these very deeply concentrated absorptions is the suspension or temporary quietening down of the Five Hindrances of greed, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and sceptical doubt. These are unskilful qualities which in general disturb mental development. They aren't necessarily immoral, but they're disturbances, distractions, obstructions to the development of more refined and exalted states of mind, and especially the very deep levels of absorption concentration. Distraction runs counter to concentration. For example, when trying to focus attention on the breathing, we develop concentration

1 As explained in Vism, Ch. IV. For a detailed explanation with similes, see Bodhi and Ñanamoli's translation of MN 39, pp. 367ff.

through maintaining attentiveness, but if thoughts arise we are distracted from the breath before going back to it again. But if our mind is not distracted it may just settle on the meditation object. Why can't we always attend to the breathing? It's there all the time, why can't we stay focused on it? Because other things come along. 'I don't want to watch my breathing because I'm hungry. I'm cold. There's more to life than just breathing. In fact, breathing's boring, actually.' However, even when there are many distractions, it is still possible to put forth some energy towards focusing attention and thus develop an increasing degree of concentration.

In the Buddha's teachings concentration is kept within the wider context of the Eightfold Path and not seen as an end in itself. This is important to keep in mind, because I think many people mistake concentration for some advanced state of spiritual attainment. Formally speaking, the concentrated mind is stable upon the meditation object and not disturbed by greed, aversion or delusion, so it can appear as if we have attained some exceptional state. I don't know how many times I have thought I had done so. During meditation the mind may quieten down (sometimes it's more like absent-mindedness than focused attention), but then we may think, 'Oh look, no greed, no aversion, no delusion – that's it! Awakening...I want it! Oops, greed. I lost it! Oops, anger. I shouldn't have it, delusion. Oh well, back to the breath again.'

So the main quality of concentration is a very focused stability of mind, which also manifests as an energy and strength of mind, comparable to focusing a spotlight. When the mind is focused upon a single object the subjective experience is one of exceptional mental calm, quiet and, ultimately, silence. The usual internal dialogue of interpreting, analyzing, discussing, etc. is reduced and eventually ceases. The mind can also seem extraordinarily clear and lucid, because it's focused on one particular object. We can appreciate how helpful this can be for increasing the level of awareness. We may simply be aware of a sensation in the body, and the mind does

not spin off into all the stories about it – 'Maybe it's this, maybe it's that; I like this and I don't like that'. The mind can just peacefully and carefully observe what is there. Concentration can thus support a very clear awareness, a very settled and stable awareness, without all the interpretations and stories about what is observed.

The traditional presentation of Buddhist meditation involves first developing these deep levels of concentration, and then, when the mind is very highly developed and focused, stable and clear, turning to insight meditation. Usually this is all in one paragraph – first absorption, second, third, fourth, then turn to insight, and whoosh! – we're awakened and live happily ever after. But in actual practice it may not be quite so easy, and may take a little longer than a paragraph – perhaps a lifetime or twenty.

So how do we actually develop this quality of concentration? Basically there are two main approaches, depending upon what one emphasizes or what the teacher emphasizes. They aren't exclusive; in fact, they should actually support each other. We can say that Right Concentration is development of the four absorptions and/or suspension of the Hindrances. We can either develop concentration directly to experience the absorptions through deep concentration, or we can deal with the Hindrances so that the mind can return to a natural concentration, a natural clarity, stillness and stability. Developing concentration directly is quite simple. Concentration means singleness of mind; how much simpler can we get? We just keep focusing attention. However, during the process quite a few complications may arise. Dealing with the Hindrances is not quite so simple (there can be quite a few of them), but it has many fewer complications.

WORKING WITH THE HINDRANCES

My understanding of Ajahn Chah's teaching was that he emphasized mixing these two approaches, and in fact inclined more towards

dealing with the Hindrances. I heard him teach almost every day for about five months, but I only remember his teaching the development of concentration directly once. That wasn't his main emphasis, very likely because he realized that for most people it's not very easy. It's simple, but not so easy. As a wise teacher, he knew that at least for the initial stages, it's helpful to deal with the various Hindrances first. We are invariably assailed by distractions as we attempt to develop concentration, and rather than brush them aside and go deeper into concentration, we attend to these mental disturbances. It is most important to recognize that they are not things to be 'got rid of' as we may normally think; rather, they are symptoms of grasping at selfhood to be worked with skilfully and wisely. However, we do so from a mind that is more calm, stable and clear than usual, which is not quite the same thing as having the idea that, 'OK, I'll sort out my problems first and then I'll have concentration.' We actually aim towards some degree of calmness and clarity of mind, and then work with the obstacles that may arise during the process of experiencing deeper levels of mental calm. We have the meditation object of breathing as a foundation and we can always return to it, but in the process, rather than just ignoring the Hindrances – going back to the breathing, back to the breathing, back to the breathing until we're deep in absorption – it can be useful to look at what is distracting our mind. What kinds of disturbances come up in the mind – thoughts of the future, memories of the past, particular issues with people, the angry discussion we had with somebody last week? Dealing with them is not easy, because they come in many different forms. There are said to be five basic distractions, as mentioned above, but I have observed more than just five and you may have done so too. Indeed, we could make a list of them and see how many we can find.

Everybody experiences the basic Five Hindrances to some degree. One or other may predominate in practice at certain times, so it's helpful to be reasonably proficient in confronting all of them,

because we'll have to deal with each one eventually. There are some basic principles we can use in working with each of them. When our mind drifts off the meditation object we bring it back again, back to the object, back to the object. But sometimes just going back to the meditation object isn't quite enough. Some of these disturbing thoughts or influences may keep pulling us away persistently. My personal rule of thumb is that if something returns at least three times it's becoming serious, and so it may be beneficial to give it some special attention. The mind may just forget about the breathing once or twice, but the third disturbance shows it is persistent and must have some power to it.

DEALING WITH DISTRACTING THOUGHTS

In a scripture[2] the Buddha describes how to deal with distracting thoughts. Basically there are five different ways. The first approach when some disturbing thought or emotion arises and continues is to attend to a more positive aspect of it. For example, a thought of anger towards somebody which arises again and again is an unskilful distraction, so we try to focus on something more skilful. Thus, rather than being angry at that person, we can bring up forgiveness or practise friendliness (*mettā*). If we dwell on the anger it just goes on and on, unresolved, and the other person may not be present to talk with and resolve the matter. If we bring up more wholesome thoughts, wishing that person well rather than dwelling on anger, we can break out of the grip of the distracting thought.

If physical attraction comes up, rather than obsess about the attractiveness of the body, we turn attention to the four elements or the thirty-two parts of the body. For example, we reflect on the skeleton. Somebody may be very attractive on the outside, but consider that person as a skeleton under that flesh – not very cuddly then.

2 MN, Sutta 20.

Sloth and torpor is a difficult Hindrance. It is basically due to a lack of physical and/or mental energy, so we need to find ways to generate more energy. Try sitting with the eyes open, making sure that the back is straight and upright, or sitting at times when the mind is clear and well-rested. And especially, be aware of any attempt to suppress the wandering thoughts rather than energetically observing them.

Restlessness and agitation is an excess of energy, so it needs calming down or channelling. Rather than sitting meditation, some walking meditation may channel that restless energy into skilful activity which can develop more concentration and awareness. If we are distracted by restlessness when we try to sit, by turning that restless energy into the energy of walking meditation, we channel it into a more beneficial activity.

There are many kinds of doubt: doubting about practice, about our own abilities, about the Buddha. Whatever kind of doubt it is, we can find a way to work with it more skilfully. If it is self-doubt, rather than dwelling on all our mistakes, we can reflect on our successes too. Instead of doubting the Buddha's teaching, we could read some of the scriptures and recognize the great words of wisdom there. Our interpretation of them may not be clear and thus may lead to doubt, but if we go back to the original texts they can seem much clearer, and inspiration can be ignited. One way which I've found very helpful is to read stories about enlightened disciples. The Pali Canon contains a series of poems by enlightened monks and nuns, and reading them can be very inspiring. The incredible energy and faith of those early enlightened ones give awareness of another dimension of spiritual practice, and help to make it more personal and alive. Sometimes, if we're too narrow-minded or closed-in on our own practice, we can seem a long way away from the path. We become preoccupied with our faults, the limitations of our practice and the length of the journey, and lose sight of our successes. But by reading the personal stories of people engaged in spiritual practice,

perhaps we may see the path in a more positive perspective, so that paralyzing doubt fades into the background.

Thus there are various ways to relate to the Five Hindrances more positively and wholesomely. A wiser, more balanced perspective may resolve and put an end to them. But if a Hindrance continues to arise and has more power than we expected, the second approach is to reflect on its unwholesome, unhelpful aspects. Thus, does dwelling on anger do any good? It's just going to make life more miserable, isn't it? We fume and get high blood pressure, while the target of our anger wonders what is the trouble with us. Anger damages *our* life, disturbs *our* mind. Anger might hurt the other person if it became aggression, but as we stay on the meditation cushion, we don't act it out. Thus we dwell on the fact that anger just ruins our life without affecting the other person, so it's really quite useless to dwell upon anger.

The third way to deal with disturbing thoughts is to ignore them, not pay attention to or dwell on them. This means changing our state of mind. So if distracting thoughts keep coming up, instead of proceeding with the meditation, we could do something else, such as reading some of the scriptures. We could read some of the Buddha's wise teachings and this may help to shift our thought patterns to more meditatively supportive ones, for example, changing from our fixation on anger to something more skilful. Sometimes these thoughts persist because of association. We think of anger, and then we think about the last time we were angry, and the time before that, and before we know it we're full of angry thoughts. It can be very helpful to notice how our own train of associative thought normally works. Being able to observe this cascade of thoughts triggering thoughts can be a valuable insight into impersonality, into how conditioned we are by our programmed thought patterns. We start off by being angry at the insect that bit us this morning, and we end up angry at the gods – this is a celestial conspiracy;

all mosquitoes are out to get us. But if we can turn to reading or listening to some Dhamma teachings we can interrupt the train of associative thought, and this could shift us into a more wholesome, beneficial mood, conducive to developing concentration.

The fourth method is to contemplate the very source of the distracting thought. Where did all this come from? We don't ask why it came – if we ask why we are angry with someone, we may end up with distracting reasons – 'Because they did this, and they did that, and they're like this ...' and so on. Just looking at the fundamental mechanisms behind the whole process of aversion, irritation or anger enables a reflective experiential enquiry – 'I feel angry at that person because I was hurt. So I'm hurt, right? He wasn't hurt. He said something insulting and I felt hurt. What was hurt? My pride was hurt, that's what was hurt.' That's quite a different story from being angry at that person because he said something. 'He said something and I heard it, but maybe I heard it wrongly. Maybe he didn't say I was a fool, but that I was "foolproof", and I misheard him.'

If we can contemplate the initial sources or foundations of anger, this turns things around. Rather than being angry at the other person, I realize I'm angry because my precious pride has been hurt. Another source of anger is righteousness – that person shouldn't get away with that. He should be punished for it, so I'll punish him with my anger. But that's like whipping ourselves. If we can turn things around and contemplate the source of the distracting thought, anger in this case, it actually comes back to ourselves, our own perceptions and attitudes.

When the Western monks first went to England they stayed in a house in north London, and across the street was a pub with live music on weekend evenings. Ajahn Chah taught them, 'The noise doesn't bother you, *you* bother the noise.' It's just sound, we're the one who says ouch. It's our personal interpretation, our conclusion, which is the cause of the hurt, the cause of the disturbance. Sound is just sound. Sound is happening all the time, and we say, 'I like this

sound, I don't like that one. This sound bothers me, that one pleases me.' So when we contemplate the source it goes back to ourselves. This can provide an entirely different perspective on a distracting or disturbing thought. We see what the real sources within us are, and at the same time we learn about ourselves. Rather than trying to get rid of our anger, we look at what causes it in the first place. We may try to suppress it and get rid of it with concentration, but it's caused by relationship to selfhood. When we understand this we can begin to unravel some of these thought patterns. We can learn to let go of our righteousness, we can learn to be less sensitive to our hurt pride.

And finally, the absolute last choice mentioned in the scriptures is that if the thought still persists, we should chase it out of our mind with clenched teeth. We must be very careful here, because if we have, say, anger and we chase it out, more anger may arise. We might just change anger at another person for anger at ourselves – 'I'm angry at myself because I've got this angry thought in my mind, so I'll chase it out. Get out of there!' So the right attitude is most important: we drive out that distracting thought because we realize it is unskilful and troublesome, and not conducive to concentration, but not from anger. Perhaps a more helpful image is that of a hand reaching into the brain, picking that angry thought out and putting it in the garbage bin. Or if we're familiar with computers, we can just move it to the recycle bin, or delete that program.

So dealing with these different distractions and disturbances is not quite so simple, because there are a variety of them and different ways of dealing with them. We may work with anger by bringing up forgiveness for the focus of the anger, and that may succeed for a while, but we may come across situations where we've reached the limit of our forgiveness and have to find another skilful means, another way to work constructively with anger. This will require more reflection and contemplation, and very likely more

concentration, tranquillity and mindfulness, so that we have the right state of mind to deal with these different disturbances. This is the fertilizer for wise reflection and wisdom.

Many of these distractions happen at different levels of our consciousness. Usually the ones on the surface, the first ones we come across, are relatively benign. They're just little irritations we have in the course of our life. We generally become aware of them first because they're less threatening. But as we become more calm and aware, we notice different levels of them. We have had a long history of aversion and greed, etc., and with increased awareness we can arrive at deeper existential levels. Then our selfhood may feel threatened. Imagine having to deal with anger towards your parents, for example – but we all have some anger from our early years with our parents. At some levels this could become existentially difficult, because we've built our ego on the security of our parents and yet we still have to deal with our reactions to them. This is the fertile soil which germinates wise reflection to facilitate the releasing of grasping. The more we let go of grasping at selfhood, the more we experience deeper collectedness as a stable foundation for ever clearer insight.

DEVELOPING CONCENTRATION DIRECTLY

For most people with a busy life and many responsibilities, the development of concentration is not easy and usually does not bring any extraordinary results. Concentration is, however, one of the key factors in Buddhist meditation, so it is definitely a necessary quality to develop. For most people the main thing is really the meditative process, the inner spiritual journey through which we proceed as we attempt to develop concentration in the course of our everyday life. However, for anyone serious about developing concentration for any length of time or to any depth, it is crucial to have the guidance of a teacher, because many kinds of unusual things can

happen when we focus the power of mind and at the same time raise our level of consciousness.

In simple theory the development of concentration proceeds like this: we, the subject, focus consistently on a meditation object, until with perseverance and diligence we arrive at absorption or unitary consciousness, at *samādhi*. In this strong concentration the subject is united with the object, and it is usually accompanied by ecstasy, energy and other exceptional qualities. In fact, however, the practice of concentration is not quite so simple. It is a mysterious journey through an amazing display of self-images, manifesting in all manner of appearances. Increasing our concentration can be like turning a spotlight on various parts of the mind, and often we come across aspects of ourselves we never knew were there. What focused awareness may reveal can be quite disconcerting. At the same time, with the quietening down of the self-referencing mental dialogue, we have a different experience of our sense of self which can sometimes be quite disorienting. In the process, with increasingly focused psychic energy, a variety of psychosomatic symptoms may manifest. Some people can have strange things happen in their bodies, such as experiencing the body floating, feeling bloated like a balloon, or flowing with pulsing energy expressed as tingling sensations, quivering, shaking or convulsions. Likewise, a variety of mental phenomena may appear. The most prominent ones are probably mental images, which may initially be vivid memories returning. In my early years trying to meditate in Thailand, some of the memories I had from travelling would come up so vividly that they seemed more real than the original experience. Sometimes they were very distracting; for example, I'd be sitting trying to watch the breathing and an image of a beach in Greece would come up. And I would know, 'Oh, no, it's going to be a Greece day today.' Sure enough, all day long images of beaches in Greece (sometimes beaches in Turkey) would pop up one after another, and the breath would seem ever further away. I could smell the air and

sense the sunshine; then I would open my eyes and realize I was in northern Thailand a couple of years later, with no sandy beach or sea anywhere.

So as the mind becomes more focused and concentrated, visions or hallucinations may come up, or we may start to hear special sounds. Some of them can be very positive and enticing – golden lights, bright colours, 'celestial' music, etc. However, the most important point is to relate to them as just 'mental phenomena'. They are just passing phenomena similar to thoughts, sensations, breathing. If we become fascinated by them we may be side-tracked, sometimes for years, or our fascination may lead to an attraction to them which can result in dependence. Often, too, once we become attracted to some of these phenomena, they can turn from beautiful to terrifying. One woman I heard about became quite fascinated by the visions which came up in her meditation, even though she was warned by her teacher. One day she saw a person hanging from a rope. Intrigued, she went closer to investigate, and got the shock of her life when she saw it was she herself who was hanging. Although the explanations about developing concentration are quite logical and systematic, the Buddha also said that the realm of the absorptions was one of the 'incomprehensibles' (*acinteyya)*;[3] that is, they cannot be comprehended by conceptual thought. Also, with the development of the fourth absorption, various forms of psychic power (*abhiññā)* [4] can manifest. Thus the guidance of an experienced teacher is a most valuable support through the meditative process.

The development of concentration gives rise to some powerful experiences, and yet it is still a mundane, ego-based reality. Because the basic disturbances are suspended, it can sometimes seem as if we have attained very highly. We can experience mental stability, energy, peace and happiness that last for weeks, and we may think,

3 AN II,79.

4 DN I,78-85.

'That's it, I'm happy and blissful – enlightenment!' But eventually we may 'crash' and all kinds of negative thoughts may arise – aversion, confusion, fear, doubt, etc. We lose our mental stability because it's a conditioned activity of the mind, only a temporary experience, and we may become disappointed, even disillusioned when it changes. It's very rare for anybody to be able to sustain deep concentration for very long; we eventually have to come back to 'normality' as a subject relating to an object. Of course, in that process of experiencing deep concentration, we may transcend our usual perceptions of subject and object to some degree. We're usually locked into a dualistic relationship of subject relating to objective world – here I am, and there's the world out there. But with the experience of subject uniting with object, that coarse perception of subjective selfhood is altered. We at least understand how much it is merely a perception, and not quite as stable as we usually assume.

Even though deep concentration is a temporary state, it provides supportive qualities like stability of mind and the loosening of subjectivity, which can be a valuable foundation for developing deeper investigation and enquiry. When the self-obsessed mental dialogue quietens down, concentration provides a more objective, less subjective view of reality. We are able to view reality more directly, with less reactive interpretation. The quieter the mind, the more 'space' there is between observing phenomena and reacting habitually to those phenomena. We can watch the breathing or investigate parts of the body, without the associated stories or associations that usually well up. We can observe reality more as it really is.

But the experience of unitary consciousness or trans-dualistic concentration can only be sustained temporarily. That's why, in the Buddha's teachings, concentration is not the end of the practice. Just absorbing subject into object is only a temporary loss of oneself,

and we eventually have to come back to that familiar self. Thus the Buddha was not convinced that this was the way to Awakening. Rather, he discovered the path of realizing the nature of the subject/object relationship and liberation through non-grasping of the attributes of selfhood. When there is no grasping or holding onto subjective selfhood, there is no holding of the contrasting object; they are seen as inter-dependent processes. The Buddha taught a way to develop a thorough understanding of the process of grasping at selfhood, so that we can step out of it quite consciously and systematically – we do not just lose our self temporarily in concentration, but release the grasping of selfhood with insightful wisdom. We still have a reference to a relative sense of self, but we no longer believe it to be ultimately true.

SUMMARY

I would say the approach of working with the Five Hindrances has fewer complications than just repeatedly returning to focus on the meditation object, because it doesn't usually generate so much concentration that unusual physical and mental phenomena arise. Also, we are typically dealing with our everyday self issues of greed, aversion, and delusion, and learning actually to resolve those issues, which are not only hindrances in meditation, but also hindrances to a contented, peaceful life. Anger does not just disturb meditation; it's also disturbing to our family relationships and work situations. It's quite a common experience for people who have some unresolved aversion to end up dumping it on somebody else who had nothing to do with it, because they can't handle it themselves. Hence learning to deal with the problem at any particular level will help us to find more peace in life generally.

Even if we don't experience deep concentration, working with the Hindrances contributes to greater psychological balance and self-awareness. Through the meditative process of developing

concentration, even to a minor degree, we observe various aspects of the nature of body and mind. If we try to concentrate for hours at a time we empower the mind, but if it is not overseen by wisdom, it could go off into all kinds of strange places. Concentration is a very strong power, and without the supportive qualities of a stable way of life, stable relationships and a stable mind, it can even be dangerous for some people. But the Buddha taught how beneficial the development of Right Concentration in the correct context, with morality and wisdom, can be for spiritual liberation and life in general. By developing concentration a little at a time, day after day, we may begin to recognize that it has some effect upon us. If we have the ability to sustain it through the different fundamental habits of the mind – tiredness or sleepiness, restlessness, and so on – we then find we're changing some of those habits. We can actually make the usual distracted, wandering mind experience more collectedness and concentration. Most of us have unwittingly trained our minds to be distracted. We can multi-task, but it can be quite a challenge to try to do just one thing at a time. But we can re-condition or re-train our mind to have some stability and concentration. If we do this step by step with some continuity, we will notice more concentration as a normal way of being; we will see it begin to grow in our life. Perhaps we will not experience profound states of absorption, but we will experience more general stability of mind. Developing concentration in this way has very few complications.

Unfortunately, many people mistake concentration for meditation. They think they'll just sit there and watch the breathing, watch the breathing, watch the breathing, and forget about their problems and distractions. Then they become repressive and compulsive, and end by not dealing with the problems and issues that arise – they keep pushing them away until one day there's a crisis and all the backlog of unresolved problems comes flooding in. This was my own experience during my first years meditating in Thailand. When I arrived there I thought meditation was just concentration, that I

could sit there in my hut in the forest and concentrate my problems away. And it almost worked. Once I was sitting in my hut intently watching the breathing when a man came to visit. I heard him come down the stairs, but I just kept sitting. He walked in, not seeing me sitting in the corner, but as soon as he saw me he came striding across the room with outstretched hand and said, 'Hello, I'm John Smith.' And I said, 'Hello, I'm ...I'm ... I'm ...' But I couldn't remember who I was – I was just my breathing. When I did remember who I was, all the self stories came back again.

People can very easily be sidetracked by concentration, because it can give some very noticeable results. But as explained, if we keep emphasizing it too much, it seems as if it is the end of the path, and some people have been misled into believing they have attained awakening because they have experienced deep concentration. Ajahn Chah's teaching was mainly about the nature of the mind and working with the conditions of mind, resolving the endless tricks it gets up to. On occasions he did mention the development of concentration and the factors that lead to the absorptions, and it's generally held that he was able to access some of these deep levels of concentration himself. But mostly his emphasis was on different degrees of peacefulness of mind, and I think that's a very good standard. There are many views and opinions, and thus confusion, about what exactly *jhāna* is, and how to distinguish its different levels. It's quite a complicated area of understanding, and if we become involved in it we could end up with more distraction than concentration. Rather than spending time discussing the theory of concentration, the real issue is experiencing it for oneself, experiencing the various degrees of mental calmness personally. I don't know how many times I've been sitting reasonably peacefully when the thought arose, 'Is this the first *jhāna*?' (Obviously not if I can think about it!) However, if we reflect in general terms on different degrees of calmness or peacefulness of mind, we don't need to be caught up in specific explanations or debate – this is the

first level, second level, third level, whatever. There is just the direct personal experience of different degrees of peacefulness of mind.

Ajahn Chah gave the simile of taking a big rock and putting it on grass. When the rock is on the grass, the grass doesn't grow, but when we take the rock away it starts growing again, because it hasn't completely died. The point is that concentration just temporarily suppresses the Hindrances, the disturbances of the mind, so it appears as if they're completely gone. But when we come out of concentration the mind starts going back to its old habits again, because the Hindrances aren't cut off. The roots of the grass are not dug up yet. Of course, if we put a rock on the grass it's easier to dig up the roots. If the grass is growing tall, people come along and cut it, and think that's enough, but a week later it's growing again. Concentration makes it easier to dig up the roots, but I think that emphasizing it too much misses the point of liberation through wisdom, and even that there are some dangers to it.

One of the most obvious dangers is disembodied spirituality. Some people who come to spiritual practice have experienced quite a bit of suffering, and one of the typical unspiritual ways to deal with a lot of suffering is called dissociation. It's a survival technique for the psyche. If we have a lot of bodily pain, for example, we dissociate from the body; if we have much emotional pain, we dissociate from the emotions. If we have suffered much mental pain or turmoil, we dissociate from our mind. And when we come to spiritual practice and hear about concentration with states of bliss – ah, dissociation! The same kind of syndrome is triggered off; we sit there and dissociate. Some people are quite good at this; they take up meditation to dissociate in the meditator's posture, calling it a spiritual virtue. If we dissociate in ordinary life we're considered a bit spacey, but if we sit dissociating in the meditation hall it's often mistaken for spiritual progress, and unless we have a very good teacher, most people wouldn't even know what we're doing. Thus some people intrinsically have a predisposed tendency,

and society has an undiscerning propensity, towards a dissociated, disembodied spirituality. I think, however, that the Buddha was well aware of this frequent tendency. That is why in the formulation of the Seven Factors of Awakening and the Eightfold Path, the factor of mindfulness is mentioned *before* the factor of concentration. That is, the emphasis is placed on developing a firmly grounded awareness of the body, feelings and conditions of mind before embarking on the development of concentration, which can lead to a powerful experience of altered states of mind, perception and reality. Being mindfully and wisely attuned to the body and well aware of the variety of feelings and mental states reduces the possibility of slipping into states of dissociation.

Another danger, if we can call it that, is that if people can access some of these deep states of concentration, this may short-circuit their interest in liberation. When they have any suffering they may just sit in concentration, sit in these absorptions and become peaceful, rather than actually having to investigate and deal with the sources of their suffering. They can relieve the suffering temporarily through concentration, and their enthusiasm to work on a solution to suffering is dampened down.

Then we come to the question of how much concentration we need for liberation? There's quite a range of different opinions. Some of the Forest Tradition Ajahns say we need at least the fourth *jhāna*. This may seem very discouraging. But there are other options too. Some say just the first absorption is all we need, and others talk about what's called *kanika samādhi*, which means 'momentary concentration'. When we have some awareness, when our attention is focused on something, we have concentration too. In this way the concentration is led by the awareness, rather than meaning the fixing of attention on a certain object and not being distracted no matter what comes along. If we emphasize awareness, then the awareness is looking around at things to focus on or settle on. Some

teachers say that's all we need, just this momentary concentration, that's enough for a real breakthrough into realization. So there's hope yet.

I personally like Ajahn Chah's definition. When I asked him how much concentration we need, he said it should be developed until the mind was 'just calm enough'. Maybe this sounds a bit vague to some people – enough for what? What is enough? Actually it was a profoundly wise answer, because each of us has to find out for ourselves through practice. It also helps us keep the right perspective. Calm enough for what? Calm enough for insight. Calm is not an end in itself. Calm is a tool, a foundation, a basis for clear seeing, for insight. Only insight leads to awakening; concentration alone does not. It's only one of the Factors of Awakening, but it can be a very helpful support for insight. And each person is different. For some people 'calm enough' could mean a lot of concentration. Some people have a very busy, slippery mind, which doesn't really hold onto or settle on any object easily or for any length of time, so perhaps they need to put more emphasis than most people on developing concentration. For other people whose mind can settle on things quite easily, concentration may not need much developing. A man on a retreat in England came to me during interview time and explained about the very intricate workings of his mind. It was quite amazing. I was surprised and curious, and asked what his job was. He was a television repair man! To him, looking at all the circuits in a television was just like looking at all the circuits in his brain. So he'd trained his concentration on the job. His limitation was looking at the bigger picture. He was caught up in looking at all these minor workings of his mind, but the purpose of meditation is to realize the bigger picture, the overall principles of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality.

So Ajahn Chah's advice was to experience just enough calm for insight. And we all have to know for ourselves, discover what for us

is calm enough. Also, each time we practise is different. Sometimes the mind may be really busy, so we need to spend the whole time just focusing on the breathing. Other times we come and sit, and after a few minutes the mind is calm already. What kind of calm is it? Is it light calm or heavy calm? Is it calm conducive to increased mindfulness or investigation of dhamma? Is the calm supported by joy, energy, tranquillity? Then we can either put more energy into insight meditation or continue to develop ever deeper levels of concentration. As Ajahn Chah taught, 'The deeper the calm, the deeper the insight.'

7 EQUANIMITY

MEDITATION

Taking up a comfortable sitting position, we first bring attention to the body sitting here, being aware of whatever sensations there may be.

Now settle the attention on the sensation of natural breathing. Notice the relationship to that sensation, whether it is easy and comfortable or whether we have to put forth some effort to notice it.

Now for a moment bring attention back to the bodily sensations. As you observe them is there a sense of settledness about them? Do you refer to like and dislike, or can you be more even-tempered with the various sensations?

Then turn attention back to the sensation of breathing again.

This time, as we bring attention to the sensations in the body, see if you can notice the feeling tone related to them. Do these sensations feel pleasant, unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant? Which of these feeling tones is most noticeable? Which is most common? If you notice a sensation that appears neutral, see if you can give it

some extra attention. What is the nature of this neutrality? Is it a lack of real feeling? Or is it a real neutral feeling, a kind of being OK? Or is it an evenness, an equanimity?

Then turn attention back to the sensation of breathing again.

Now turn attention to the condition of the mind. Is the mind calm or active? Is that calm reasonably even or steady? If the mind is active can you notice the condition behind it? Is that knowing of it even or steady? Can you be aware of a steady quietness behind the mental activity? What is the emotional state of observing the mind?

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We will reflect here on equanimity, the seventh Factor of Awakening. As you may remember from the last chapter, it is one of the factors in the fourth of the concentrated absorptions or *jhānas*; it is also the fourth of the *Brahma Vihāras* or Four Divine Abidings. So perhaps you can appreciate just how advanced this quality is, since it occurs as the last or most developed in each of these lists of categories. In the fourth absorption equanimity is even more evolved than happiness. The factors of the third absorption are one-pointedness and an unmitigated well-being. Imagine if you can a kind of unalloyed, timeless, unbounded well-being, where all your cells are humming with warmth and goodness. That's the third of the absorptions, a pretty high one – but even that is a little coarse! From there we go on to equanimity, where even this humming of the cells is disturbing. Hard to imagine, isn't it? But that's how refined it is.

Equanimity plainly translated means 'equal-minded' or 'even-minded', a mental and emotional equilibrium. All of us must be fairly familiar with the multitudinous ups and downs of our moods. At some point we realize that this emotional roller coaster is not satisfying, and then we may begin to appreciate the value of equanimity. In an everyday context, however, equanimity is not much talked about. We hear more often about people's 'passions'

rather than their 'equanimities', although some people may think, 'That's how a Buddhist is, wise and equanimous.' They recognize equanimity as something noble and worthy of aspiration.

My experience is that equanimity isn't quite as easy to develop as it appears. I tried to develop it some years ago, but ended up with something very different. During my second year meditating in a forest monastery in North Thailand, I had a lot of thoughts coming up which I defined as 'worrying thoughts'. I had originally planned to go to Thailand for one month, get enlightened and go home. But there I was, still working on it two years later, with recurring thoughts of whether I should stay (enlightenment could be right around the corner!) or just pack it in and go back to university. Should I be realistic rather than so idealistic? I didn't have a proper visa either, because my entry card was lost when I came to Thailand, and I had to go to the immigration office every two weeks, where they'd say, 'Sorry sir, come back in two weeks.' So I was really uncertain as to what I was doing there, 'Am I staying? Am I being kicked out? What is happening?' I looked in a meditation manual which said that the antidote for worry was equanimity, so I thought, 'I'll just develop equanimity, then' – and after a while I fell asleep. Actually, it wasn't even sleep; it was just blanking out, it was unconsciousness, which became a real problem. I tried everything to combat it. I tried to sit at the best part of the day, five o'clock, after a cold shower and a cup of coffee. I'd sit there, and after an hour I'd open my eyes and I wouldn't know where I had gone! It's OK to sit through a drowsy meditation, but if you are not aware of where you are, it's very worrying.

Around that time I had to go to Bangkok to sort out my visa, and I took the opportunity to go to a meditation monastery in a town on the east coast. I told the teacher there about this problem and he replied, 'Oh, just look at sleepiness, look at the whole process of sleepiness.' I thought, 'What? Isn't that the problem? I just blank

out, how could I see it?' However, at this meditation monastery there's nothing to do except look at your experience. So after about a month of watching sleepiness I began to notice that it wasn't actually sleepiness, it was more accurately unconsciousness. In the second month I noticed that before unconsciousness there was neutral feeling, or an emotional numbness. Then in the third month I noticed that before neutral feeling there was seemingly equanimity, but actually, looked at closer, it wasn't equanimity at all; it was indifference, it was actually a turning off from experience. The indifference in this case was turning off from the worry, turning off from a disturbing experience and being indifferent to it; and then there was a numb feeling before there was unconsciousness. So in order to unravel the problem I had to go back to the source and stop creating indifference. Once I stopped developing indifference, the sleepiness stopped, but then all the worry came back! However, at least I was conscious.

Sometimes it's more reassuring to be conscious with your worry than to be asleep and so not knowing of it. One of the dangers of trying to develop equanimity directly is that it's very likely to become indifference. True equanimity, though, is even-mindedness with regard to all the difficulties: the worry, the busy mind, all the problems. Thus equanimity results more often from developing many of the other spiritual qualities first. Developing concentration provides the possibility of calming down some of our usual emotional reactions, habitual interpretations and self-supporting stories. Through the development of mindfulness we learn to tune into the conditions of mind, including our way of reacting to what we experience and its inherent impermanent nature. Investigation of dhamma helps us to realize some of the background causes of this reacting, which results in some degree of letting go. In this way we are preparing the ground for a more balanced, equanimous engagement with reality. Otherwise we may idealize or hypothesize some kind of equanimity-like mood, when in fact we are repressing,

resigning from or damping down our energized moods, or resorting to an aloof, spiritless, emotional frigidity. So perhaps you can recognize how refined equanimity is.

Now, you may ask, 'Well then, how do you develop equanimity?' Perhaps it is best to start with the indirect way. The chant on reflections on well-being mentions the four *Brahma Vihāra* meditations. Wishing to be free from affliction, etc. is developing friendliness for yourself and for others. Compassion is wishing 'may all beings be released from all suffering', and empathetic joy is wishing that all beings may 'not be parted from the good fortune they have attained,' that is, rejoicing in other people's well-being or good fortune. The last part of the chant has to do with the development of equanimity; that is, we reflect on the principle of moral cause and effect, of *kamma-vipāka*, that 'all beings are the owners of their actions, and inherit their results.'

So we can develop equanimity in stressful, troubling situations by contemplating the principle of cause and effect, action and result. Instead of being angry at something or someone, you could contemplate how their actions will have appropriate results. If you want to be righteous about it, you could say to yourself, 'Well they insulted me, they're going to get insulted too.' Not quite equanimity yet, is it? However, we are at least contemplating that we are all answerable for our actions. The complication is that there is no set time for these results; they ripen in their own time. We could consider many hypothetical situations. Let's say for instance that people insult you. It may result from one of their habits – they may insult everybody, and one day they may insult the wrong person and get a 'knuckle sandwich'. Or those people may not have many friends because they are very insulting. You can say, "Ah, that's *kamma-vipāka*, that's the result of their actions.'

We have to open our minds somewhat to this idea, this universal principle. If we become angry with someone, we usually react in a

narrow, personalized way – 'I'm angry with her because she did this to me.' But to develop equanimity it is more beneficial to consider the bigger picture. We understand that the universal principle of action-result is more all-encompassing than our own personal reactions (and more ethically neutral). We're all subject to this principle, not just that person; we're answerable to it too, and if *we* succumb to anger we too will experience its results; we may become sick with anger, for instance.

If we can contemplate the principle of cause and effect, that all intentional actions will have their result in some way or another, we can step back from the personal to embrace the universal. When you recognize anger arising, you also understand that what you do with that anger is your responsibility. You can maintain the anger if you want, or you can acknowledge, 'There is the principle of cause and effect, and if I can take a step back from the personal, the universal will deal with it in a wiser way.' We don't have to be so personally involved; we can abide with even-mindedness, contemplating this timeless, universal principle. Maybe we won't see the results of someone's actions immediately, but in a wider sense, over time, those results will eventually come about. You need to have a certain amount of trust in this. You can work on equanimity by abiding more in this even-mindedness – 'Hey, I don't have to react to the ups and downs of life; these things will sort themselves out.' How many times have you been upset about something and then, even while you are stewing over it, it just resolved itself?

We learn as we grow older or spiritually wiser that we are all part of a much grander, impersonal process, and we become more experienced in how situations often resolve themselves in their own time. Sometimes we don't really need to do anything to sort them out. Then we can realize the value and purpose of equanimity, and accept the idea that these things, these situations, will even out through the principle of cause and effect. Doesn't that thought make

you feel more even-minded, more relaxed and relieved, perhaps a little equanimous?

Equanimity is sometimes understood as resignation to or acceptance of fate. However, this is not a very spiritually developed understanding of it. Rather than just accepting our fate, we recognize that we function within a universal causal principle and can change our fate through right action. In the Buddha's teaching 'kamma' literally means 'intentional action'; we have the power to act within the bounds of an ethical causal process. For example, if we do something wrong it could give a certain potential result, but we can correct that – we can apologize, we can make amends – and change the potential result. So action gives potential results; it's not as deterministic as fate. We can change possible results, we could even cancel some of them out. In fact we're continually changing results, because we are acting continually.

Buddhist equanimity is that even-mindedness, that emotional equilibrium which arises from a wise tuning to the true nature of reality. When we understand that all things are constantly changing, in harmony with the principle of cause and effect, there is often no need to react personally, no need for elation or dejection, for taking or rejecting. We have seen how reacting merely spins us into new actions and results, and thus prolongs the cycle of further reacting.

Maybe you noticed in the meditation exercise I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, just as I have noticed, that some form of even-mindedness is present much of the time. However, most people don't notice it; they don't recognize it or they don't see it in the right context; they may think it's just boredom. When there are no strong emotions pulling you up or down, there's a certain even-temperedness and you think, 'Well this isn't very exciting, is it?' Usually we are looking for the more exciting emotions which stand out, and because of this the background steadiness, the even-

mindedness, doesn't attract our attention. Sometimes it can be mistaken for dullness of mind or maybe indifference, but there is often a quality of mental evenness, composure, steadiness there as well. If we give attention to these qualities, perhaps they will begin to stand out a little more in our consciousness.

Sometimes when we begin our meditation we're actually looking for problems, for disturbances, rather than looking at those moments of peace, of quiet, of equanimity. But if we had those moments pointed out to us in the context of the Seven Factors of Awakening, we'd see the value in that even-mindedness; perhaps we would give it more emphasis, because that is what gives us stability. You may sometimes have noticed that if a problem arises in the course of a day which is quite evenly paced, when you have some steadiness, some stability of mind, that problem becomes easier to deal with. This even-mindedness becomes a supportive element for concentration. In the fourth absorption you have a very stable mind with equanimity. With happiness and joy there are fluctuations, because they are more active states. With equanimity, however, the stable mind just carries on; with or without happiness, it stays even-minded.

When living in England I was invited to teach a class at a local school. While waiting in the vicar's office, I noticed on the wall a big poster of an angel with the caption, 'It's easy to be an angel when nobody ruffles your feathers.' Buddhists would say, 'It's easy to be enlightened when nobody stirs up your defilements.' That is, it's easy to be equanimous when you aren't being disturbed by any difficulties – but there's no challenge in that. Ajahn Chah would call that the equanimity of a water buffalo. When problems begin to occur, thoughts and emotions start arising; that's a test of your equanimity. When this happens, you remain present – you don't dissociate, you don't run away, you don't become indifferent or numb. You still respond, but with even-mindedness.

In the context of the Factors of Awakening, equanimity follows and is thus supported by concentration, and before that tranquillity. Ultimately, however, perfect equanimity comes from wisdom, from clearly seeing the true nature of things. When one understands that all things are impermanent, always changing, ephemeral, what is there to get excited about? Everything is just changing phenomena, just flowing processes. Ultimately equanimity is that profound, dispassionate stillness where everything manifests but is not reacted to, just silently received.

All these Seven Factors of Awakening work together, although for different people some of them may predominate more than others. Someone who worries a lot may need to work on even-mindedness, on not being so caught up with the different states of mind that arise and with trying to sort them all out. Even-mindedness is a valuable principle, which becomes a powerful quality supporting increasingly deeper insight.

8 THE SEVEN FACTORS TOGETHER

Now, how do we put all these Seven Factors of Awakening together? In a practical sense you've probably already noticed that some of them are quite active, energetic qualities, and others are more calming. There are three active ones: investigation of dhamma, energy and joy. Three others are calming: tranquillity, concentration and equanimity. And mindfulness watches over them all.

First we become familiar with the whole range of these qualities. As you know, they're in the mind already – we all have some tranquillity, some concentration, some investigation and so on. When we recognize what is truly tranquillity and not just passivity, the difference between equanimity and indifference, we can learn how to cultivate those positive qualities. Recognizing them as Factors of Awakening, we give them some emphasis, some cultivation and development, so that they become prominent qualities for spiritual practice.

With mindfulness as guardian, we observe the particular condition of mind on any occasion and adapt the practice accordingly. It is not a good time to develop tranquillity when the mind is in a dull state,

a sluggish state, not very active. You've got enough 'tranquillity' already. When the mind is sluggish and dull, it may be a good time to develop the more active qualities. If the mind is tired or low in energy, it may be time to develop the factor of energy. If the mind is depressed or down, maybe joy is the quality to develop. When the mind is dull, muddled and unclear, it may be appropriate to develop investigation of dhamma, the investigation of phenomena, and bring up reflective thinking so you can investigate the nature of things and clear the mind. Conversely, when the mind is active and excited, tranquillity may be a good quality to help balance it. When the mind is scattered or restless, perhaps that's a good time to develop concentration. Concentration provides a boundary, a focus. When the mind is doubting or worried, equanimity is a good balance for it.

The Seven Factors of Awakening come together as what we call samatha-vipassana, calm and insight meditation. That's what the Seven Factors actually create. Calm meditation is primarily energy, joy, tranquillity concentration and equanimity. Insight practice is primarily mindfulness and the investigation of dhamma. Thus what we call calm and insight meditation brings the Seven Factors of Awakening together, and this is how the Buddha defined Buddhist meditation: calm and insight, samatha-vipassana. Calm and insight meditation, the developing of the mind, is the fundamental meditation practice, leading to a clearer, more penetrative view of the true nature of reality, and culminating in the experience of full Awakening.

9 AWAKENING

MEDITATION

Take up a comfortable sitting position, keeping the back upright. Begin by bringing attention to the body sitting, sensing into the physicality of body, the sensations which are our direct experience of body. Are there any places where there is some strong or obvious sensation? If so, we try to relax or relieve these strong sensations as much as possible.

Now, as you are attentive to the sensations of body, can you just be present with whatever sensation is there? Or do you notice the mind drifting into interpretation, judging, liking or disliking? Just observe what is happening. As a point of reference you can settle your attention on the sensation of breathing, just silently observing the inhalation and exhalation.

Now for a moment bring attention to the feeling tone. Is the most prominent feeling tone pleasant, or unpleasant or neutral? Can you just be clearly and openly aware of that feeling tone, beyond judgement? Then go back to focusing attention on the sensation of breathing once again.

For a moment bring attention to the condition of the mind. Can you distinguish a particular condition of mind? Is the mind calm or busy, clear or cloudy? Can you be clearly and openly present with that condition, silently observing?

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This chapter's theme is awakening. This may seem like an anti-climax, because we all know that real awakening is a direct personal experience, not something we can just talk about (in fact, all we can do is talk *about* it). The Buddha had his own unique experience of awakening, although he didn't talk much about it. There's a danger that talking too much around the subject may only lead to mental speculation and thus give a wrong direction. On the other hand, providing at least some guidelines and explanation may give some inspiration. As long as we keep in mind that these are only words which can't really explain or encompass the whole experience, words may give us the right attitude. If awakening is presented as 'the void', or 'nothingness', or something ethereal, we fill in the blanks ourselves with our own ideas.

I deliberately chose this word 'awakening' as a translation of the Pali word '*nibbāna*'. I could have chosen the word 'enlightenment', but I think it can be misinterpreted. The problem is that 'enlightenment' is a noun; it's a thing, an object we want to get, and thus the word triggers our old ways of thinking. Years ago when I went off to Thailand for spiritual practice, I was actually going there to 'get' something like enlightenment. I was going to sacrifice a whole month of travel, get enlightenment, put it in my rucksack and bring it home with me. Customs authorities wouldn't require me to declare my enlightenment – everything else, but not enlightenment. It's duty-free. What would happen if they asked whether I had anything to declare, and I replied, 'Just my enlightenment'? They'd probably lock me up – they wouldn't want people like that, just ordinary tourists.

The word 'awakening' is part of a verb, it is an activity, a waking-up process. We can even reflect on the analogy of waking up in the morning – consciousness begins to become clearer, it tunes in to reality more and more, until you recognize that this is how it is. The limitation of that analogy is that when we wake up in the morning, our self-consciousness usually wakes up too. Consciousness is not only waking up and seeing the sun shining or rain falling; there's also a sense of 'I' coming into consciousness – 'I am feeling good', or 'I'm feeling bad'. But you could try waking up in the morning without your self-consciousness, giving it a holiday, giving yourself a break. Can you do that? Maybe you could come closer to it if you've developed the Seven Factors of Awakening.

The Buddha delineated four successive stages of awakening. We don't have to awaken all at once, so it's not too overwhelming. The Buddha also gave an analogy: just as the shore of the ocean slopes gradually, so his teaching also inclines gradually towards nibbāna, awakening. Some Buddhist sects believe in instant enlightenment, not the gradual process of awakening. Maybe some people do have an instant or spontaneous awakening, but I think that even if they do, that experience still requires a certain development and filling out. One can have moments of clarity and glimpses of truth, but unless the experience becomes really grounded in our whole being, it's just a flash of insight and that's about it. It's like when we wake up in the morning. We can have an 'insight' into how the day might be, but then we need to build our life around it. So even if we have an 'awakening experience', we still need to integrate it into spiritual practice, put it into our life and live it.

When I went to Thailand I just wanted to get enlightenment and go home again – still be my wonderful old self *and* enlightened too. The trouble was that when I was practising meditation, I realized my self actually wasn't so wonderful after all – in fact, it was a real problem. The process of awakening entails awakening to the ultimate truth,

which is beyond our selfhood, beyond our limiting grasping at self. Everybody can wake up in the morning to their self and their self-created view of the world; that's what we do all the time. But to wake up to a world without self-distortion is quite different. It's a radically different way of being.

The Buddha's graduated teaching on the four stages of awakening is one way of giving people something practical to which they can relate. They can recognize that they are changing. Certain fetters, certain disturbances, certain ways of relating are gradually relinquished. The most important breakthrough is the uprooting of personality view. Recognizing that the self is really just an artificial creation and not an ultimate entity is the first really profound insight. It's a very significant insight into impersonality.

The self is interpreted in different ways, but one primary interpretation is that it has control. This is my body, I can tell it what to do. This is my mind, I can tell my mind what to do. But if we look closer and more honestly, we see that we don't always have control over our body. We're certainly not always able to control our mind; in fact, it seems to have a will of its own. Try to direct it somewhere and often it doesn't go there; try to think of something and you've forgotten it. You soon realize that you have only limited control over your body and mind, that they are not ultimately a permanent self.

We can have some intellectual appreciation of this. We recognize that there are certain uncontrolled impulses. An American psychiatrist wrote a book called 'Emotional Intelligence', which is about being mindful or more aware of our emotions. He coined the phrase 'being emotionally hijacked'. Some people don't know themselves very well and their emotions take them over, hijack them. Realizing this may encourage us to bring more awareness to the conditions of mind and emotional life. Most people so identify with their emotions that they see those emotions as themselves, and are thus enslaved

by them. However, by realizing the impermanent and impersonal nature of body and mind, we release this identification habit and see just conditions arising and passing, just bodily sensations and mental conditions, without grasping at a fixed self-entity.

If one knows one's own mind fairly well and has been able to observe the conditions of mind that arise on different occasions, one can be in those moments of change and still be very confident and at ease with them. We can ride that wave of change with the breath; if we're just with that breathing process as it's happening, the moment of change can be quite exhilarating. We recognize that we can't really know where the wave is going to break, but we can know the general possibilities. We can't say exactly that 'this mood' or 'that thought' will arise, but by observing the conditions of mind that do arise, we have a general idea of where the wave will go. Surfers can't say exactly where a wave is going to break, but if they've experienced many waves, they have a pretty good idea. They can almost predict where a wave will go.

So if we've been developing the Seven Factors of Awakening – especially mindfulness or awareness, being able to observe the conditions of mind and conditions of body – we have a pretty good idea of what's going to happen, although we can't say exactly. We may observe that a lot of these conditions arise through causal processes, without any 'me', just impersonal cause and effect processes. We can open to the way the mind really is, the way the body really is. Our grasping at selfhood feeds on habit and predictability, and needs to preserve its familiar ground. That's why fear is such a big emotion for people who grasp very strongly at the self; they are afraid of the familiar order falling apart, of losing control of things. It's a very great relief when you don't have to keep up that charade of 'me and my special body/mind, and my particular patterns of behaving'. Of course, this doesn't lead to total chaos either; we're still within the cause and effect relationship. So the way the Buddha

explains awakening in the conventional sense is as a causal process – develop these particular qualities, and this will lead to insight and the uprooting of the various 'outflows of selfhood' (*āsava*). When we've recognized some of the games the self can play, we no longer accept them so easily. We 'wake up' to some of the ways in which selfhood is trying to block us from seeing truth: sense desires, the coming into existence of certain conditions of mind or being, or holding set views. Selfhood tries many ways to disguise the truth.

The Buddha didn't talk very much about awakening, but when he did he referred to it in very practical terms. For example, the word 'nibbāna' literally means 'going out', in the sense that a flame goes out. You could make a play on words by saying, 'The candle has nibbāna-ed'. But if we translate it too literally, 'nibbāna' becomes 'extinction' – we're going to be extinguished. This may sound exciting to nihilists or annihilationists – 'I won't be anything, just a puff of ash.' But the Buddha's teaching was not annihilation and not eternalism. He taught the middle way between those two extremes. If we translate 'nibbāna' too literally as 'extinction', we may give the wrong impression and simply attract nihilists. Eternalists may go to Christianity, which offers eternal bliss. But annihilationists would be attracted to Buddhism, where they can be extinguished.

But in a sense there is a kind of extinction, because nibbāna can be said to be the extinction or cessation of greed, aversion and delusion, the cessation of craving and ignorance. Thus it is the cessation or extinction of certain aspects of selfhood with which we're familiar. On the other hand, the Buddha also gave some very positive explanations of nibbāna as the ultimate well-being, and he talked about it in a more mystical sense as the unborn, the undying, the unformed, the uncreated, the unconditioned. But what is that? How can we know it? What we know are the formed, the created, the conditioned. That's where our practice is, within the realm of what's created and conditioned. And so we don't go directly to the

unconditioned, but rather we observe any condition and realize that it arises and passes away. We actually realize by a process of elimination – not extinction, but elimination – that if nibbāna is not that, then it must be something else. If we see the conditional arising of selfhood – the incessant 'I like this', 'I don't like that', 'I like the body', 'I am the body', 'I am the thoughts' – we realize this is not the unconditioned. So we just turn away from those references to self and recognize that the unconditioned is somewhere towards the selfless. We can get a hint of it through awareness, by just observing what the conditions of the body and mind are, by not going into 'I like it', 'I don't like it', 'It's good', 'It's bad', but just being directly with a particular experience as it is. Then that sense of 'I' does not arise, but there is still clear presence of mind. There is a quality of knowing, there is some clarity and collectedness, not clouded by the sense of 'I'.

In the Buddha's time there were many different teachers and teachings, and different spiritual seekers, and some of those seekers would go to the Buddha and inquire about his teachings. Once somebody came and asked him for a simple, very succinct teaching. The Buddha answered, 'In the seeing, just the seeing; in the hearing, just the hearing; in the cognizing, just the cognizing.' When we can do that there's no more self-referencing and no things which the self can grasp. It's not 'me' seeing or hearing, it's just seeing, just hearing, just being with the immediate experience. It sounds very easy, but try to do it – 'Am I seeing?' 'Am I not seeing?' 'Am I not thinking about 'I'?'

However, developing the meditation exercises gives us a different orientation in our mind – just being able to observe the breathing, for example, not observing 'me' breathing. I could sit and observe 'me' breathing for the next thirty-five years, and that would probably just inflate my ego – 'look, I am an exceptionally accomplished breath meditator'. But if I'm just observing the breathing process

without that interference or addition of self-reference, something different happens – there is just breathing. We're coming closer to that direct experience of awakening to the unconditioned.

And we may sometimes have a kind of spontaneous awakening. What we awaken to then is the truth, which is always here. If it wasn't always here, or if it was only here on Sundays and Thursdays, it wouldn't be *the* truth. It would just be Sunday truth or Thursday truth, but not the ultimate truth. But it is here all the time, and every once in a while when the self is on holiday or caught off-guard, there may be a moment of clarity – quite a different experience. In effect, this can happen at any time. Meditation does not create such moments, but when practised within a comprehensive spiritual path, it can create the most fertile ground for awakening to happen.

You have probably read some Zen stories. They're very inspiring to read: some monk is just brushing his teeth or washing his bowl and – Aha! – he's enlightened. Note that his previous thirty or forty years of meditation in the freezing snow are rarely mentioned. It's always just that awakening experience; wow, he's got it! The benefit of these stories is that they point out that awakening can happen at any time when there is mindfulness and concentration.

The word 'nibbāna' was translated as 'extinction' by the early scholar translators of the Pali Canon. Many of them were not Buddhists and never practised Buddhism, so they could only rely on the literal meaning of the words they read, and that's what 'nibbāna' meant literally: extinction. But there's another interpretation of the word which is derived from the Hindu belief system. Going out ('nibbāna') referred to a flame going out, but in the Hindu belief system a flame is a manifestation of the fire element, a fundamental elemental quality. Earth, fire, water and air are the four primary elemental qualities which are always present. Everything physical contains these elemental qualities, so our physical body shares them with the floor, the walls, the trees, everything. This is very good in

environmental terms – we share this body with the trees and the rest of nature. We're part of nature, and we'll go back to those elements again when this body's life force finishes and it breaks up. If we apply this to the concept of a candle going out (taking care to avoid the extreme of eternalism instead of annihilationism), the candle flame is simply non-manifest when it goes out. But it hasn't totally gone. It's not totally extinct, not totally vanished. It's just non-manifest any longer, not apparent or visible.

The elemental qualities of earth, fire, water and air are inherently present, and sometimes they manifest as an object. An empty glass is primarily the earth or hardness quality, manifesting temporarily in the form of glass. When it breaks it is no longer a glass, but the earth quality still persists. That doesn't mean that it is gone; it is just not manifest as a glass anymore. This is the sense of 'nibbāna' – a 'going out' of what we normally consider to be 'myself', 'my' body, 'my' mind, a 'going out' of the usual identification with physicality and mentality as being my self.

A more refined explanation of awakening or nibbāna is that there are two kinds: there is awakening 'with residue', meaning being awakened with a living body, or while still alive; and there is awakening 'without residue' when the awakened person dies and the body breaks up. The first designation refers to the condition of awakening with the usual expressions of body/mind still intact. The awakened person still has the five aggregates – body, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness. If we translate 'nibbāna' as 'extinction' in this case, it could be interpreted as meaning that somebody who is awakened simply disappears as if by magic. However, it really refers to the fact that although there still is a body/mind complex, there's no self-identification with it. So in a way this normal designation of a person has 'gone out', it's not manifesting anymore. But that doesn't mean the total extinction of body and mind, just the extinction of the personal identification with body and mind as 'me' and 'mine'.

We have to be careful to avoid falling into some form of eternalism, for example by thinking that when we realize awakening, we go to some eternal Buddha-realm, are whisked off into a non-manifest realm of Buddhahood. Indeed, some people have referred to nibbāna with residue in those terms. However, I think that what the Buddha is trying to point out is that it's something we can no longer designate, or which is non-manifest according to our usual terms of reference. It is very hard to define because it is the unconditioned, while we are only familiar with the conditioned. There is not the usual reference to a subject, a person who can know what the unconditioned is. The unconditioned can be experienced, but it can't actually be demonstrated. It's impossible to show someone the unconditioned. It doesn't manifest in this self-referential realm.

So we must go back to our practical understanding of what we designate as 'the conditioned'. What are the conditions of our selfhood? Maybe that's why the Buddha designated four different stages of awakening. The first stage is the 'stream-enterer', which at least is attainable in this lifetime. On one occasion Ajahn Chah said something like, 'If you live a whole lifetime with spiritual practice, with morality, diligence and meditation practice, at the end of your life you should be awakened. You should be at least a stream-enterer.' If you can devote a certain percentage of your time and energy to spiritual practice, you *should* be awakened. If you're not, you obviously haven't been practising properly – not enough energy or morality or meditation.

I think Ajahn Chah was trying to make awakening more accessible to people, because there is a risk that we may raise it up to be such a high and lofty thing that it seems unattainable. It's the carrot up there; we can never reach it, but we will still soldier on anyway, ever-suffering Theravadans. If awakening seems too remote, people will believe they can never be awakened because it's too far away, or they're incapable of it, or something similar – that 'I' again. But Ajahn Chah was trying to point out that awakening is something which is

attainable, which is realizable. With right view, with right effort, it's not totally impossible. It's a different way of being, of perceiving, of manifesting (or non-manifesting). If we're still functioning within the realm of 'me practising, me wanting to get better and more developed, me getting closer to awakening', the carrot of awakening will keep moving away, because we're still referring to 'me, me, me', 'I, I, I'. But instead we can just come back to those direct experiences when the sense of 'I' falls away and doesn't need to manifest any more. It doesn't need to be there all the time. You can wake up in the morning and say, 'Hey, self, take a rest today. Sleep in', and then you can just see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think, without the self being involved. I think this does happen quite spontaneously on occasions, but usually it's outside the realm of our control. The best we can do is to create the right conditions for its arising – the Eightfold Path, the Seven Factors of Awakening. This creates the right environment for it, but then we have to let go and trust.

In one of the scriptures the Buddha gave the analogy of a ship that's been wrecked on the beach. There's no need to take it apart; if it's just left, it'll slowly decay by itself. The analogy is that we don't have to dismantle our self; if we just keep observing what is actually there – just breathing, just seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking – the grasping of self gradually fades away. It doesn't need to be used any more; it doesn't have a place to be used. It just takes a holiday. And if we can abide with that, the habit of grasping of self gradually loses its self-importance. It doesn't manifest any more, it 'un-manifests'. Unfortunately, many people interpret awakening as some powerful and special experience. Instead of patiently and steadily uprooting the various seeds of selfhood, they aim for an intense experience which transports them to 'awakened land' to live happily ever after.

The insights leading to awakening are into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality. A primary quality of selfhood is constancy. It seems always to be here, but when you look closely

at what is there, you realize that it's not as constant as it appears. You notice that what we call 'my body' is just physically changing processes, and what we call 'mind' is just changing mental processes. You begin to wake up to the truth of impermanence, change, transience – there are only changing processes, so where is the ever-constant self? Believing in this selfhood is deeply unsatisfactory, since we are continuously disappointed by this false view; it is out of tune with reality. And if this illusion of selfhood is impermanent and unsatisfactory, can I really hold onto it as my dearest self?

We could say conventionally that there are many different selves. If one takes a holiday, another temporary one may fill in for it. That is, I have a multitude of selves, but 'they' manifest depending upon the conditions or the situation. There is not one solid, permanently-abiding entity. This doesn't mean that there's absolutely no self, just that there's no permanently abiding selfhood. The Buddha himself referred to a 'sense of self' when he said, 'I remember this' and 'I feel like that'. But of course, he knew that 'I' is just a convention, a point of reference, and not a permanently abiding 'I' or selfhood.

In the first level of awakening, the three basic fetters that are broken are personality view, attachment to rites and rituals, and doubt. If you meet this requirement you've made it, you've entered the stream. But the ending of those fetters is based upon insight into impermanence so deep that we fully embody it. We live on the crest of that wave of change, or we flow with the ever-changing stream of change. This also applies to our spiritual practice, because our selfhood takes on different disguises. Perhaps the spiritual exercises which worked previously will not work as before. With a fuller realization of impermanence we become more creative, vigilant and dexterous in our practice. The danger of getting too attached to a system or technique is that we can identify with it and then hold on to it, 'Here I am, I've only developed three of the Factors of Awakening so far. Give me another few years to get to the

fifth, then the sixth, the seventh.' By thinking in that way we may be identifying with a developing spiritual self – 'I'm at this level', 'I can do this', or 'I've got this far' – and thus turn these spiritual exercises into another kind of self-reinforcement.

As insights begin to deepen greed and aversion are lessened, and gradually the four 'outflows of selfhood' become more rarefied and less fixed ways of relating. We see through them. To be manifest and functioning they need a constant selfhood, with its views and its habitual coming into existence in different forms. I think the term 'stream-entry' is a very good analogy. Some people operating in the attainment-oriented mode think they have to 'get' to stream-entry, but the whole point is that one has to *go with the flow* of the stream. It's not a matter of just getting a certain insight or reaching a certain stage; we have to be able to flow with that new way of being, live our life in the flow of awakening, the flow of impermanence, the flow of non-self. This means that our life is transformed. But if we have not prepared the ground for that through skilful living, mental development and wise self-knowing, this transformation is only temporary. As the saying goes, 'It is relatively easy to be awakened, but it is hard to stay awakened'.

The analogy of 'entering the stream' means entering the stream flowing to full awakening. Some people want at least to reach this first level because they think that otherwise they'll have wasted their time, as those who don't at least reach stream-entry can always slip back down to the suffering of the hell realms. (Of course, even if they did, they would still have generated good kamma for their future existences). But with stream-entry there's no more falling back, you're in the stream to awakening, straight on course for nibbāna. At the very worst, if you're a really recalcitrant stream-enterer, you'll be reborn in the human realm seven more times. Isn't that a relief? Only seven more mortgages!

Of course, it can be hard to judge attainments. I remember that people in Thailand had many different views about people's attainments. If a teacher was very good he was obviously a fully-awakened arahant. But if he fell from grace there was bewilderment – how could that happen to an arahant? Well, someone may have a profound insight and be quite transformed for a while, but unless he can really ground that insight in ordinary life and flow with it, selfhood will emerge somewhere else. He has realized the process, but hasn't learned to flow with it; he has confirmed it, clutched it and made it into something solid – 'I am now enlightened, so it's okay.' But that's missing the point. This is the problem of relating to spiritual practice from the goal-oriented attitude. Unless there is a truly deep and well-integrated realization of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality, the habitually grasping self is still active to grasp at anything, even spiritual experiences. This analogy of being a stream-enterer means we have to enter the flowing stream of truth.

Quite a few people I met in Thailand were practising to 'get to stream-entry', but there seemed to be something a little doubtful about this. Ajahn Chah's main approach to teaching was to provide people with the right way of living. He didn't talk a lot about big breakthroughs to awakening. Sometimes he would even say the opposite, 'Don't get awakened too quickly. It won't be fun any more.' He placed greater emphasis on the way of practice, and this is actually what is in the Buddhist scriptures, where most of the teachings are about the path or the practice. Very rarely do they mention the result. Ajahn Chah's approach was to give people a grounding in the fundamentals of living in this way, being in harmony with it, and then awakening would happen quite naturally.

It's very hard to judge other people because we have different interpretations and sometimes very fixed ideas. It is believed in Thailand that arahants never touch the ground – they hover above

it. But I think this is taking things too literally. Arahants floating above the world seem not to be of the world any more. They are still *in* the world, but not *of* the world. In a way they are beyond it – but they still eat, still go to the toilet, still take a shower. So to take the notion that they hover too literally is to miss the point.

There's an interesting story, not from the scriptures but from the later texts. There was a very highly esteemed and honoured teacher. Everybody (himself included) thought that he was awakened because he was such a great teacher and gifted meditator. But one of his disciples was even more gifted and realized awakening first. The awakened disciple, with his great psychic powers, applied his mind to his teacher and realized that he was not quite awakened yet; he just thought he was because he was so famous. This was a bit embarrassing, of course, because he was the teacher, and it's hard to go to your teacher and say, 'Excuse me, teacher, but you're not awakened yet.' However, the disciple had a clever way of showing the teacher that he wasn't awakened. He said to him, 'I hear you're really good at manifesting psychic images. How about making one of an elephant?' So the teacher created an image of a raging elephant. Then the disciple said, 'See if you can make the elephant come charging towards you.' So he made the elephant come charging, and then he saw he was afraid – 'Ah, there's fear; I'm not awakened.' But he was very close to awakening, so he could easily establish concentration and insight and was quickly awakened. He had been very close to awakening, but not quite there, so beware of thinking you are awakened. Conceit is one of the last fetters before awakening to the level of the arahant.

So rather than trying to explain too much about awakening, it's at least possible to give some general idea of what its principles are. Maybe the realization that awakening is indeed possible will be an inspiration. Some degree of awakening can happen at any moment,

and very likely quite a few people have had awakening experiences, but just didn't recognize them as such. Suppose you didn't have all those thoughts about yourself (if you observe your thoughts, you may have noticed that quite a few are about yourself). Just imagine how spacious your mind would be. Think of all the energy you wouldn't waste thinking about yourself. So where would that energy go?

An American psychologist did some research into what are called 'peak experiences' – moments of clarity, not necessarily within any kind of religious tradition, but some very profound experiences people have had. He found that most of them didn't want to have such an experience again, even though it was really transforming and very blissful, and so on. I think the reason was that they didn't have a context for the experience. One woman who came to talk with me had had quite a profound experience of selflessness. When she was about eighteen she was out walking in the garden, and quite spontaneously lost her sense of being someone, of being a solid self. There was just oneness with the garden, the flowers and the butterflies, just bliss for some minutes. Then she came out of it and thought, 'What is this? Who can I talk to about it?' but she had nobody to talk to. That's really sad, really tragic. So she kept it to herself for about forty years, and then she came to the monastery and had this talk with me. I said, 'Oh yes, that's a state of spontaneous unified consciousness. It happens sometimes.' She was very relieved that I didn't diagnose her as schizophrenic or something similar. Such an experience can happen in meditation or even outside it: people sometimes forget themselves spontaneously, because our selfhood is an artificial thing. These moments of selflessness are the way things really are, but we think they are moments of craziness They may sometimes be due to chemical imbalances in the body, but if we can recognize them in the right context, we know they are glimpses of the truth behind the illusion that the self presents to us as reality.

We see things then as they really are, and if we know this within the right context we can use those experiences in a skilful way.

The Buddha points out that the mind has great possibilities. He gives us the map showing the way to truth – this is what awakening is like, this is what delusion is like. He allows us to see more clearly where we are and where we're going. This can help us to benefit from the supports of spiritual practice. That woman wasn't a Buddhist when she had her experience; it doesn't require only Buddhist practice or only Buddhist interpretations. It can happen to anybody at any time. But the Buddha gives us a path of practice so that we can carefully prepare the right conditions to ensure this experience is not just a one-off, fleeting and sometimes confusing event. Through the ever-deepening development of the Seven Factors of Awakening, we increasingly uproot the basis of selfhood and awaken more fully to the truth.

Hopefully this gives us a better perspective on what awakening is, and some direction or point of reference which we can use to refer back to some of our experiences. Are we still in the self-centred conditioned mode? We can spend years and years developing spiritual practice, but still remain in that conditioned mode – 'I've got more concentration, I've got deeper insight, more wisdom.' The real wisdom, the real insight, is outside that – selfless, impersonal, transpersonal, beyond the influence of self.

I'm actually referring to two things here: a sense of self, and selfhood. Selfhood is expressed through the 'outflows of selfhood' – this is the selfhood we believe in as being an ultimate reality and to which we cling as being a permanent entity. When we see through this falsehood there is still a 'sense of self'. I have a sense of self, but I know it's only a sense, not the real self, so I can refer to it, but I can put it down too. It doesn't become an obsession, though sometimes it does become an obstruction. The thinking, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching are more true without 'me' intruding

and interpreting them, distorting them; when I realize that, I can just put 'me' down and be with the seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. Being with those direct experiences lets that sense of self take a holiday.

That sense of self has its place too; it isn't total delusion, but believing in it as an ultimate reality obstructs us from seeing the truth. The sense of self is only one part of the picture. If we begin to observe what's going on in this mind and body, we can see that non-self is actually the bigger picture. We can learn to integrate that in harmony with a balanced sense of self. So hopefully this possibility of awakening may be awakened within you.

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