

Meditation: a Way of Awakening

Section 2: Developing the Mind

Great Heart

Do you ever feel that you're on your own? That you're the odd one out, the flawed or failed one, the one who's getting a bad deal? Or that you really messed up in your life? Maybe as you're reading this, you're ill, or experiencing bereavement...maybe you're serving time in prison, maybe you're just feeling depressed or isolated. When you're feeling small or under pressure, what's needed is great heart.

Great heart is something that will develop for you through meditation. The simple practice of sitting still or walking calmly brings you to a firmer place in yourself, your still centre. This calm offers the space within which the warm emotional intelligence that we all have can open up and come forth. Also, the skills that you develop in referring to that still inner ground will greatly strengthen your sense of balance and confidence, and that means you don't tend to get caught in burdened or speedy states of mind.

The training in firmness is based on meditation on the body, which is a vital support for the cultivation of heart. This heart grows greater when we develop our sense of empathy with others. Empathy brings us out of the isolation within which we get tight, defensive or jealous, and it begins with the simple but often overlooked reflection that whatever state we're in, other people have been there, are there right now, will also come the same way – and get through it.

It may seem like small comfort, but when you develop this reflection it transforms that sense of being stuck in your predicament into the sense that 'we're in this together.' This sense provides a ground from which the mind can lift out of its downward spiral – because to have others there in the same struggle is an experience of solidarity. (That's one aspect of what 'Sangha,' the community of disciples, means.) Empathy gives you a place to stand. If we develop that sense of widening out of the narrow and trapped 'me' sense, we can get through what life is bringing us at this time, instead of plummeting down into despair, or churning up with bitterness. Because others have come through challenges, we can. This is the courage and confidence of the great heart – and it's in all of us.

As long as we keep in touch with this capacity, the great heart stays with us. It can bear with what's passing through us, and bring forth compassion for others. It mirrors and senses many changing states, but its reflective and empathic nature isn't in any particular state. Properly trained, it can sense a mental or physical state, reflect on it and also widen out of the limitations of that state. We don't have to deny a feeling, or get lost in the stories that our emotions evoke.

In the following exercises we use steady attention as a tool to investigate the nature and domain of the great heart.

Consider how you are right now, how you feel as an overall sense. Maybe it's a good day, or you're relaxed...how does it feel to feel that way? Can you appreciate the health, happiness or ease and just be with it?

Bring to mind an occasion when you felt really good: fulfilled, at ease, welcomed – whatever feeling good means to you as an expression of heart. Or imagine what it would be like, right now, to feel at ease. Keep bringing that memory or image back until you can linger in its effect, feeling the feeling and letting go of the idea or memory that evokes it.

Contemplate how that feels in your body, especially around the heart area. Feel your breathing move through that area, through your entire chest and open into that feeling. Imagine widening and softening, and keep steadily relaxing the chest, solar plexus and jaw. As these areas unlock, let the breath-energy bring the heart-feeling to the entire body.

Distill the sense of that into something sacred, something that is a part of your heart independent of time and place.

Holding that as a wide field of awareness, contemplate whatever felt senses arise and move through it. Relax any attempt to understand or react to tingles and shifts; keep returning to the wide field of heart-awareness as if it were a pool of water through which other energies could pass – and within which they can dissolve.

When this reference is established, you can bring topics to mind. Maybe there are some worries or concerns or even distress. Maybe the pleasant state seems fragile. How does it feel to feel like that? Is there any sense of support or sympathy with that?

Consider what that feeling depends upon – your health, your financial position, your relationship with another, your idea of what the future holds... What would it be like to put those matters aside for half an hour? Is there anything stopping you from doing so?

Try that again...what would it be like not to base your state of being, good or bad, on the current state of affairs? If you sense an opening there, feel into that, and sense how or even who you are in that open space. Is there anything stopping you from being at peace with yourself? If so, acknowledge how that feels. The nagging sense, or the sense of holding, or of being stuck – what does that feel like? Does all of that have a bodily effect – such as tightness in the head or shoulders?

Then how do you feel about that sense of holding or being stuck? Can there be some empathy, some compassion maybe, for that? And without trying to change it, what would it be like if that sense weren't there? Without having to do anything or say anything, let yourself imagine the absence of that stuck feeling. What is that like in your body? Is there a way that in your body, a shift could happen out of empathy with the stuck sense?

Give yourself the time you need to explore that.

Then, if others are experiencing anxiety, loss or pain, how do you feel about this common human predicament? Can there be some sense of fellowship along with that? And what would it be like to be able to help, or even express sympathy for another person who is in a jam?

Establish empathy in regard to people you are in contact with...then to people you know about...to animals...and to the general predicament of being sentient, vulnerable and needing security.

Remember how you were ten years ago: what your interests, aims and preoccupations were. Then what your problems were. Consider that in comparison to where you sense yourself now, not to assess success or failure, but to acknowledge the change. Bearing that in mind, how reliable is it to extend your current state of being into the future? What is it like if you let the future be unknown?

Consider yourself as a child, then in youth, middle age, and old age. Reflect on your inevitable sickness and death. Place your current status and predicament within the breadth of that scope. Sense the mood that arises.

Bring to mind a person who currently occupies your attention, for good or for bad. Imagine them as a child, as older, as sick, as dying. Do this slowly to get either a visual image, or enough of one to evoke an emotional impression. Imagine them wanting or appreciating happiness and human warmth. Imagine them at ease and relaxed, then under pressure. Imagine them being rejected, or abused. Notice the changes in the emotional tones.

Sense yourself in the same way. Then recognise that someone else could do the same process of imagining about you. How would it feel to be seen or sensed in such a full and sympathetic way? How would it feel to be seen out of a role or current state, and as someone more complete?

Notice where and how that sensing occurs. Dwell a little longer in that heart-space of empathy.

Bring to mind something you've done that causes you regret. Or something that your mind hastily dismisses, shrugs off, or justifies. Try to get a feel for how or who you were when you acted in that regrettable way – the mind-state, the energy, the views and expectations you had. Witness all of that as occurring to a person unaware of the consequences of their actions. Keep that witnessing nonanalytical, but get a sense for the impulsiveness, the fear or anger that were running through your system at that time. How does that feel? Explore the bodily senses and any shifts in energy.

Witness all of this as it happens as energies and moods and even bodily states. Move out of the stories and the judgements into the shifts and flushes in the here and now.

Acknowledge that these emotions and drives are common to all people. Let this move into forgiveness and compassion.

Difficulties

A difficulty can occur around the timing: it takes very little time to read and understand these instructions, but to get the emotional feel may take a lot longer. We may feel pressured to come up with a nice compassionate mood and that either falsifies or hinders the arising of the real thing. In this case, take just one instruction, turn it over, and give it time: what *would* it feel like? If no particular feeling occurs, try visualising something or someone very specific: your job, your boss, your mother, and so on, in a particular event. You might even try talking to yourself about it, and listening to the mood in your voice. How does that affect you?

You may also assume that you have to have perfect recall, or the ability to visualise in fine detail. Actually all you need is one touch, one evocative image. The exercises are not about chronicling, or even capturing accurate literal truth. Instead we're imagining (almost daydreaming) with a suggested direction, and attending to the emotional traces in the heart.

If this form doesn't help you...

You might try sensing how other people's successes and problems affect you: even if they make you feel angry. How is it that they make you feel that way? What in you objects to, resists or is moved by others? Try to feel, rather than think the answer. How can you look after that aspect of yourself which is affected by others?

A way of sensing the heart without a topic is to stand in a quiet place with your eyes closed. Then try to get a sense of the space around you – as to whether it feels large or small, and whether you feel in direct contact with it. Take your time. The sense is not dependent on a single impression (such as a sound or temperature) but on the overall feel of the moment of standing in this space. And yes, it is helpful to focus one's attention on the chest region as if it were a large fingertip sensing the breeze. What arises may not be that clear as an idea, but will be a 'heart-impression' of the overall sense of being in this place at this time. You can brighten and strengthen it by imagining that you are in the presence of a friend, or what it would be like right now to be seen or approached in a friendly way.

Further

Practise offering the heart. This is done in a formal way with by making offerings to external

images, such as Buddha-images. Set up a shrine with a Buddha bounded on each side with candles and flowers and with a small incense holder in front. If this doesn't suit you, you can use a sacred image, or even just an empty space with a few flowers to define it. The main thing is to use something concrete, gladdening or comforting that you can physically make an offering to.

Offerings are both physical and heartfelt. We generally offer fresh flowers (symbolising ethical purity) and light the candles (symbolising wisdom) and place a lit stick of incense in the holder. Compose yourself for a few moments in recollection of the sense of the sacred, of great heart, then offer yourself bodily by bowing to the shrine keeping that sacred in mind.

You can then offer voice through chanting a mantra or one of the longer chants and recollections of the Buddhist tradition. At this time you may also feel moved to offer a prayer or aspiration for the welfare of all or any other being.

Finally offer heart itself with the sense of opening to the sacred, to the Path and the Way. Contemplate that sense of boundless opening.

Theory: Developing the Mind

Neither mother nor father nor any other relative can do one greater good than one's own well-directed mind [Dhp 43]

In this section, we'll look more fully into the cultivation of mind, based on the skills developed through the previous instructions. In these, we learnt a few things about mindfulness – the ability to bear something in mind – and full awareness – the ability to scan, evaluate and get some understanding out of what is being borne in mind. It's a simple and direct cultivation, not a matter of adopting any belief-system or academic learning. Yet out of this practice there is a development of mind that taps into and strengthens our capacity for composure, integrity, and kindness. And most important, we gain the strength and the understanding to clear the mind of psychological hindrances.

Establishing the mind as witness

A key form of understanding that develops from meditation is 'insight' (*vipassana*). It's a direct, rather than intellectual understanding that all mental activities, thoughts and moods, come and go. They fluctuate and pass – they're impermanent (*anicca*). This may not seem radical as an *idea*, but as an *experience* it shifts how we relate to such phenomena, and even what we sense ourselves as being. When ideas, viewpoints, beliefs, and emotions are experienced as transitory and ephemeral, we regard them with greater detachment, and our sense of identity no longer rests on what we think or feel. Mind-stuff seems to happen to me, but it's not who I am. Also it's clear that the 'me' that things happen to also changes. This 'me' can be bright, receptive, sleepy or irritable. It's sensed as 'myself,' but its state is dependent on causes and conditions such as sense-contact, physical health, and what the world landed on me an hour/day ago. So neither the flow of mind stuff, nor the receiver of its impressions, offer any kind of solid identity.

The receiver of mind is mind-consciousness (*mano-viññana*), and like any sense-consciousness (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body) is a stream of sensitivity that registers particular phenomena. In the case of mind-consciousness, these phenomena (*dhamma*) are the thoughts, moods, memories, and impulses which arise dependent on sense contact. Within this stream of mind-consciousness, the active centre is mind, or 'heart' (*citta*, pronounced 'chitta'). It can go along with what states are arising, react to them, distract, or formulate responses. It experiences the present state of consciousness in terms of agreeable or disagreeable feelings (fear feels unpleasant, love feels pleasant) as well as meanings ('this is threatening,' 'this is food') and comes up with impulses like holding, rejecting, or classifying. All this requires careful attention, so mind takes up the central position at any moment in consciousness. Naturally being in such a position, it is experienced as the 'I' in 'I am...(hungry or happy or disappointed).' But it's not an autonomous entity and it doesn't have a lasting state of being. It senses things differently when it's stressed than when it's at ease, and it's liable to come up with a different set of responses. Its activities and creations are also received into mind-consciousness, so there is generally a considerable flux of mind-stuff going on dependent either directly on seeing and the rest, or upon thoughts and emotions.

We might liken mind-consciousness to a ball that is always rolling and swerving dependent on the changing environment that it is in, with the mind as the part of it that interprets and responds to how it is affected. To operate properly, mind has to stay connected and not passive. An acrobat riding such a ball has to flex, know when and how to apply more muscle, when to throw out his/her arms to support balance, which way to lean in order to guide the ball in a chosen direction. If he/she fixates on an impression, gets rigid and doesn't flex, or spaces out on the scenery, they're going to fall off and the ball will lose its steerage. Therefore there has to be the factor of intention – above all to stay on the ball, and secondly to bear the skilful direction in mind. And the mind also has to be responsively connected not rigidly clamped onto the object. It only operates effectively if it doesn't try to be autonomous. It needs to respond to consciousness. It will be further impaired if it doesn't bear a right intention – harmlessness, compassion, non-greed – in mind; and also if it is so fixed in its viewpoints that it can't respond to what is arising in the present. Yet when it is held as a solid and independent self, that's what happens: the 'self-view' is one that wants to have things 'my way' and that means its

way of relating is always biased. When we need to control, own, or shut off the world of people, events (and our own minds) we don't establish a truly responsive relationship. Because of this, 'self-view' is a major cause of imbalance, bias, loneliness, and in short, suffering and stress.

On the other hand, if mind and consciousness are not held as an identity, we regard what they bring up with less reactivity – with less fascination and defence. Instead there is more detachment, and that allows the witnessing activity of mind plenty of scope and freedom to respond. Now it's often the case that we move from noticing something to reacting to it very quickly. At other times we're so involved with thoughts and feelings that we lose that witnessing viewpoint, and lose touch with our intentions, and ethical sensitivity. If we've lost, or not found, a full and responsive connection to consciousness, it's like we're not really 'on the ball' The mind topples and gets run over by the contents of consciousness, its thoughts and emotions. Which of course radically affects what we think, say or do. Witnessing, being mindful and aware, is therefore the single most important activity of mind; it's something we do most of the time, but often in a very minimal way. This therefore is the basis of mind-development: if you don't really know your own mind, how can you help yourself, let alone anyone else?

As mindfulness and full awareness are exercised, this witnessing aspect gets stronger. Mindfulness and full awareness open up a space that allows us to respond and engage (or not) with our mind-stuff. So, because we're not so hooked up with it all, we can choose the kind of attitudes, perspectives and energies that work for our own and others' welfare. This doesn't mean putting a particular set of views or emotions or beliefs at the centre of our life, but rather making witnessing-mind our centre and letting it determine which views, values or responses are best suited to what's happening in the present moment. The blend of spaciousness which comes from detachment, and the firmness of bearing something in mind allow a fuller range of emotional and psychological material to be present than if my opinions and self-interest are holding sway. Mindfulness and full awareness then allow mind-consciousness to open and reveal where it is hot or tangled or biased, because at the moment of witnessing, the heart isn't acting on those tendencies, nor identifying with them, nor trying to fix them.

Connecting to the wise heart

Witnessing with mindfulness and full awareness isn't the same as intellectually knowing. Nor is mind a purely intellectual process – which is why I often refer to it as 'heart.' Mind has an organ, called '*mano*' that functions like the eye – it holds the focal span of attention and in this way registers the presence of thoughts and mental images. Joy, doubt, expectation, irritation and gladness are experienced as phenomena that come and go through its span of attention. However, this attention doesn't feel anything. It gives no sense of context, or of the whole picture, or of even how it affects us, so it can't form a useful judgement, doesn't tell us how to relate to experience and can't respond. Attention isn't the same as full awareness; it is controlled by whatever aim lies behind it. It can be well-guided, but it is often steered by random impulses, attractions and fears without knowing what those impulses are. It can neither give us the encouragement to bear with the difficulties, nor the initiative to investigate assumptions as true or false, nor the dispassion to look at pleasures or pains from the perspectives of value or purpose.

Now take the case of a man wielding an axe – you can watch him poised over a pile of wood, or brandishing it over your mother's head. Watching, as an act of attention, is equal, unbiased and free of analysis. But is this a good thing? The kind of witnessing that is most useful is that which refers an event to the sense of meaning, intention and feeling – in other words to the mind's base, *citta*, or 'heart.' This is mindfulness: it connects the witnessing to that aspect of mind where interpretation and meaning occur, and which comes up with a response. It bears in mind, it holds something in the heart. When there is this connection to the heart, full awareness is supported by an ethical sense and wholesome intent of the heart. So from a balanced and clear heart, qualities such as compassion, courage, patience and equanimity develop as responses to what is arising. In other words, with mindfulness, the heart doesn't just disengage, it learns how to engage in a full and clear way.

It is because this witnessing is not just bare and inert that there is development of mind. Mindfulness is an initiator of the process of Awakening, but is not enough on its own. It puts us in a position where

we can learn from the experience of riding the ball. Then we have to develop learning capacity, strength, determination and other qualities to clear hindrances and steward the mind. So through this witnessing of our own particular conscious process, the mind develops in terms of ‘factors of Awakening.’ These factors are: mindfulness, investigation of qualities, vigour, rapture, tranquillity, concentration and equanimity. They all issue from the heart with its aspiration, its inquiry, determination, as well as from a growing access to our potential for gladness, ease, stillness and spaciousness. These flowerings of the Awakening process are initiated by mindfulness because it connects directly to the heart, rather than through some complicated notion of myself and what I should be.

Working with ‘Activities’

The way that the *citta*, the heart, reads consciousness is in terms of its ‘activities’ or ‘formations’ (*sankhara*). Feeling jealous, being optimistic, or constructing a line of inquiry are *sankhara*; mind-consciousness is based on the current experience of ‘being me’ – as in ‘these things are happening to me.’ Normally the heart attempts to integrate its current experience by referring it to what it has learned previously – it refers to my values, meanings, and preferences. All sensible enough. But when the values and preferences are attuned to preserving and maintaining my being right, or approved of, or in the same old pattern of anxiety that I’ve been in for ten years, because it’s now so familiar that it feels like me... there’s no development. If we’re not prepared to let go of who we’ve been, re-assess our assumptions, and revise our strategies – past habits aren’t questioned, and the mental activities go down the well-worn track of who I am and what I never will be. What occurs instead is a solidification of particular activity/formations as ‘this is true, this is how I am, this is all I can be.’ And it’s particularly tragic when the need to be solid and not review our habits makes us adopt activities like inadequacy or irritability as ‘this is who I am.’ However, because many habits are rooted in uncertainty, anxiety, disappointment and loss, it’s not much fun going into them – which is what you have to do to clear them.

What is needed then is strong mindfulness, the ability to hold firm, and get connected to the wholesome intent of the heart beneath the afflicted activities. That is, you feel the steady and empathic sense of witnessing the urge to punch so and so in the head. You don’t act in it, you don’t repress it. Rather than deny this experience, the factor of investigation then causes us to look into how these activities happen. The way it goes is that someone or something ‘pushes my buttons’ and I react for good or bad. That’s a program, a *sankhara*. It carries an intent, a potential for action, with an ethical flavour. It feels like me, but because it’s familiar and I can witness it, I can know that it’s a program ‘happening to me.’ There’s a well-used ‘I always have to do all the work around here’ program. There’s a particular program around impressions of inadequacy or even of spiritual development: ‘I need more space, I can’t do this.’ (But you *can* witness and explore that. That’s the first development, to not make a self out of the current state of affairs.) So some of these activities are good and some are a problem, and we need to find out which ones work for our welfare and encourage those. And the teaching is that if we can do that, defective and disabling programs can be dismantled or altered. This isn’t done, and can’t be done, from some idea of my self and what I should be, (which in itself is a program) but through the factors of Awakening. They do the work of witnessing and relaxing or straightening out our programs, because they connect to the heart, and will therefore align to what is most easeful, balanced and consistent. The truth of the Dhamma is that what is most easeful, balanced and consistent is in fact the suspending of all activities, into unconditioned freedom or Nibbana – but that happens in accordance with Dhamma, not from some self-view.

Seeing past the focus that our habitual self-image provides is the first solid vantage point of Dhamma practice. This ‘Awakening view’ is one in which major latent tendencies in consciousness, ones associated with the socialised self with its need and insecurity, are revealed and transcended. We may for example experience frustrated wishes, or jealousy or fear – all fairly common traits that we may act upon as children. But as adults we’re supposed to be beyond them, even though we may not have developed what it takes to bring that maturity around. When we’re not supposed to have a program, or it hasn’t yet become conscious, it resides as a latent tendency. We all have these: we may for example not feel violent all the time, but all of us have the latent tendency to experience a violent impulse,

which only gets limited and finally relinquished by a profound maturation of heart. In the light of the factors of Awakening, that nerve and trigger gets less sensitive and finally isn't triggered. However, as long as a violent impulse is experienced from an unknowing, shadow place, our heart can't handle it, and will never learn how. Instead we might deny that we have these tendencies, or dress them up: you know – violence becomes 'a just response to the enemy' and so on.

So Awakening is about allowing latent tendencies to become conscious – in order to transcend them. In other words, you don't have to be perfect in terms of what comes up in the mind, but you can do yourself a lot of good by handling it more skilfully. This isn't always a comfortable process. Generally, the development of mindfulness and full awareness will reveal residual tendencies towards anxiety, greed and aversion and even self-annihilation. So the work of clearing, of investigating, letting go and firming the heart in stillness, has to be accompanied by kindness as well as understanding. If you sustain an intent of in-depth kindness, that really helps allay negativity and judgemental attitudes about yourself and others. And there are further developments: as long as the heart-connection of mindfulness is retained, you get more clear, courageous, and joyful. Then self-confidence and determination will arise. With this kind of backing, mindfulness can witness the evocative *sankhara* of our personal history without adding reactions, affirmations, denials and the rest of it. In this way mind's energy isn't dissipated, and the witness strengthens in concentration and the ease that provides.

The factor of investigation, when carried through with mindfulness and deepened in concentration, penetrates the fundamental source of the activities that cause us suffering and stress. This source is 'Unknowing,' (*avijja*) meaning 'obscured' or 'out of touch.' What it refers to are assumptions that throw the mind out of balance: the assumption that we have or can have things, that we can be some lasting state, or that we can find a state which will protect us from what we don't want. A lot of this is unconscious. But based on these assumptions are the confused activities of acquisition, jealousy, struggle, defensiveness, denial, frustration, blaming, losing and despair. Good to get free of, don't you think? However, when you want to regain balance, it's important not to get impatient and forceful. Don't get fazed by the smoke and clatter of these activities. Instead, get the witness to dive deeper to clear the distorted viewpoints that they're founded on.

Perception or 'felt meaning'

These viewpoints occur in another function of consciousness, the act of perception. A primary program in consciousness is to acquire perceptions or 'felt meanings' (*sañña*), impressions and interpretations of what a thing means to me. They give the immediate sense of what something is: a black and white thing with legs is understood to be a cow rather than a zebra, for example. It's not always accurate (it could be a bad model of a zebra), but perception is that recognition that initiates the arising of the thought 'cow.' Along with that recognition also comes what that thing 'means' to me: a cow as a loveable creature, or something to be milked, or a future hamburger. If I was once gored by a crazy cow, there would probably be a ripple of fear in that perception. This area of felt meaning, the mental/emotional aspect of perception can carry a huge charge when it comes to perceptions of other people – whom I might perceive as friendly, frightening, sexually interesting; or as superior, inferior; or as trustworthy or suspicious. This is natural, because our happiness, employment or partnership possibilities all hinge on other people and how we assess them. However, we don't always get this right. We misinterpret, or get let down by others, or may have assumed that someone is trustworthy or intelligent based upon the clothes they wear, their voice, or the colour of their skin. So the area of perception needs to be understood and clarified of prejudice, because perceptions trigger how I will act, for good or for bad.

A foundation for that process is to train perception through mindfulness of body. That is we attend to the perceptions of the body that derive directly from the body. Normally we might refer to the body as old or young, big or small, beautiful or ugly – but these are perceptions based on the visual experience of the body, not on senses such as solidity, warmth and movement that the body experiences in itself. For bodily well-being we need to attend to the body in itself. And in this respect, all bodies are composed of the same stuff going through the same process. A beauty queen or an athlete of two decades ago is no longer number one, but they're still experiencing solidity, warmth and movement.

There's no gain or loss or competition in that. So if we attend to the body in its own terms, agitation around bigger and better and more or less attractive in the eyes of others don't have to take hold. And when the mind loosens its fixation with perception, it's a lot more spacious and easeful.

As this well-being becomes available, it allows us a viewpoint from where we can see that all the judgements and anxieties that we put onto our own or other people's bodies are unnecessary sources of stress. So we start to let go of the hunger, the distaste and the confusion that biases the mind – because these are stressful. Letting go puts us at ease, and restores the proper balance to the mind. Compassion and steadiness come readily to such a mind. So once you get a feel for the alternatives, know you have a choice and are able to make a good choice, then letting go supports a whole re-alignment of personal value and meaning.

Just as there can be a steady shift whereby witnessing rather than a set of strategies or beliefs occupies the central heart position, so the sense of release can come to occupy the central meaning in one's life. As we acknowledge and let go of the fear, desire, or aversion that distort perception, that taste of clarity and release give a realization of a happiness and inner balance that doesn't depend on having things, or being in any particular state.

Handling mind-states and emotions

A process that brings around such radical realignments stirs up, or reveals, a lot of emotional material. Emotions accompany the heart, and form a rich aspect of what it is to be alive. So we're not trying to get rid of emotions, so much as hold them wisely to allow them to find a healthy, rather than conflicted or neurotic, form.

Emotions are mixes of 'felt meanings' and activities. Witnessing them is helped by the simple fact that the body 'resonates' with the moods and impulses that run through it. (When we're angry, we tense up and the heartbeat changes, when we're loving and joyful the body feels vibrant and so on.) This resonance gives us a way of addressing the heart by addressing the bodily effect; of steadying or relaxing the mind-state by grounding attention in the body and simply breathing. So this gives us a handle on mind-states and emotions that can otherwise bowl us over. Referring to the bodily sense is valuable, because the body can't fake or mask the feeling. And furthermore, through widening, easing and finding balance in the bodily sense, we turn on a sympathetic system that can bring the heart into true. This goes a lot deeper and more effectively than the process of 'me trying to sort my self out' – an approach that leads to complexity, righteousness, force, defence and denial.

In this process, one uses the skills of *mano*, which are of object-definition, to clearly discern what is going on in the swings and nuances of the affective mind. This mind-organ can be a good secretary because it isn't affected. It can notice that phenomena pass, and so relieve the heart from acting on them. And the heart can direct its secretary to attend to a bodily feeling, to focus on a thought, to dwell on memories or images that give rise to kindness or compassion in order to establish a skilful foothold on the conscious process. So meditation is not just a matter of noting that one is feeling or thinking and going back to the breath. We do need to use intelligence to measure whether a mood is worth attending to, and if so, how. To notice where one's sense of regret or inspiration come from is reflection, an interplay between the thought-faculty and the heart. With this act of reflection, we come to the significant realisation that the activities that give us the greatest blessings are those which are also for the welfare of others: whatever anyone is or isn't, attitudes of compassion will be for our mutual benefit. In this way, through penetrating and purifying mental activity, we lessen the sense of isolated selfhood with its tendencies towards self-centredness and prejudice.

It's always good to remember that your mind can be developed in many good ways. What are presented here are the most direct ways – those that use mind, consciousness and body, in and by themselves. This in itself is a tremendous affirmation of the potential that we all have as human beings. If we didn't have this potential for Awakening mental/emotional healing, forgiveness and compassion would be impossible. Liberation may entail working with and through all that you feel you are, but every step of the way bears fruit in terms of immediate fulfilment and an emptying out of

stale residues.

See **Working with mind-states and emotions** for more on this theme.

Elements

What and Why

When we refer to ‘elements’ (*dhatu*) in Buddhist meditation, what is meant are the modes through which we experience any form – in terms of its solidity, mobility, warmth and plasticity. The practice of contemplating the elements exercises the mind’s ability to shift its habitual ways of perceiving form, in particular bodily form. For example, we may find the shape of a person’s body attractive or unattractive without recognising that shape in and of itself is neither – it’s compounded out of solidity and plasticity. As these elements change and their current disposition isn’t a final truth. What shape is a candle flame when the wind blows? What shape is an ice cube on a summer’s day? Even when the shape remains constant for a few years, its ‘meaning’ changes. The apparently sleek design of this year’s car will look outdated in two years’ time, become antiquated in five years, and a classic in ten.

When we contemplate form in terms of changeable elements, excitement or disgust don’t get aroused. The form of a thing is just what it is right now; it’s a phase in the process of changeable elements – we can’t own it, we can’t even stop our bodies changing. In fact the body is not really ours. There’s a lot of passion and pain when we do take the shape, size, and vitality of the body personally, so coming to terms with it as a form that belongs to nature is a way of clearing out a source of suffering and stress. Seeing form in terms of elements helps us do that.

The elements are a direct perception of the body. They become apparent when we sit still and ask ourselves: ‘Right now, how do I know that I have a body?’ There will be a sense of solidity, and we can also easily discern the movement of breathing, and the body’s warmth and vitality, strong or subdued. More subtly, there is the sense of all these movements and pressures belong to the same thing. They flow in relationship: the tingling belongs to the solid matter, the breathing passes through a solid form and affects it. All these are the ‘elements’ – the solid is ‘earth;’ the moving is ‘air;’ the warmth or vitality is ‘fire’ and the cohesive, the sense of everything being bound together, is ‘water.’ Water is the element that provides shape.

You can see these elements in everything from cars to trees to stars and clouds. However, the most significant experience of these elements is in our own bodies and their energies. ‘Earth,’ the firmness and mass and ability to resist pressure, becomes apparent in the body through attuning to the skeletal structure, or to the soles of the feet when standing or walking. It awakens the sense of having ground, of being grounded, and will eventually settle into a firm supportive energy in the diaphragm. It gives the sense of resistance – holding against the pressure of something other.

Air is wind, movement, changeability and the ability to *exert* pressure. You can attune to it through the contemplation of breathing. Its natural base is the chest. Air is that sense of pressure being exerted, however subtly, as in the expansion of the abdominal and chest cavities and the distension of the nostrils. It is also the sense of ‘brushing’ within the nostrils and throat with the in- and out-breath. We might also note it as the movement of the body and the shift of internal and external pressures in walking. When it is absent, there is a sense of rigidity: a negative aspect of ‘earth.’

Fire is warmth, light and vitality. It is detected in the warmth of the body. In its absence we feel cold and dull. Fire is also desire, the impulsive and the adhesive: that which moves towards catching, connecting and clinging. It is associated with sexual, intellectual or aspiration energies – all of which have the impulse to ‘get it.’ Whereas water is the cohesive sense of being held, fire is the adhesive

sense of reaching out to hold. It centres behind the forehead and eyes and can be sensed as luminosity and motivation; we get stagnant without it.

Water represents the degree of wetness, cohesiveness and flow – and the ability to be supple and shapeable. It is most obviously discernable as moisture in the mouth, and sweat through the skin. It also refers to suppleness as in the easy softness of the lower abdomen. Water as the cohesive sense reminds us of being held together, as for example being wrapped in skin, a sense that may have the negative connotations of constriction. It can also be felt as the flushes and flows of subtle sensation through the body. Being cohesive and flowing, water brings up the experience of rhythm and pattern – sensations that flow in a discernable form. We might detect this comfortably in the rhythms of breathing, or the repetitive swinging of the hips and shoulders when we walk. As water binds things together, it counteracts the more explosive energies of fire. One way of balancing overcharged energy for example is to imagine sitting within a stream of descending water. It can be a force of harmony.

There is also a fifth element – that of space – which is an ‘inferred’ element, in that it is detected as the absence of the other four. This absence maybe sensed as a space (such as the open space of the sky, or of the throat) or as an alleviation in the intensity of an element, as is experienced when we come out of a densely crowded place. Most important, space allows release from, and recognition of, the other elements. So it’s a good element to have access to as it will support a more spacious attitude and give us an overview.

Contemplating bodily experience in these terms brings around personal well-being through sharpening attention, turning inwards and balancing the bodily energies. Instead of reacting to or even interpreting pressures, flushes and heated energies in the body, we can tune into them as they are and learn to ease, steady or balance them. In this meditation then we can begin to fully participate in the life of our own body to bring around some wholeness and healing.

Handling Body/Mind through the Somatic Sense

Body and mind are closely related in terms of energies: when we’re stressed, we feel bodily tension, when we’re happy we feel bodily brightness. The energies that produce these states are bound up with the three forms of activities – bodily, mental/emotional, and verbal. Simply speaking, what the mind feels, the body feels in terms of energies. And where the mind is stuck, the body also feels stuck, numb or reactive. The area of bodily experience where we sense overall impressions such as feeling balanced, healthy, vital, or sick is called the ‘somatic’ sense. It gives signals that are translated into emotions of contentment, nurture, vitality, rage, panic and fear, as well as subtler senses of feeling calm or open. And vice versa: emotional warmth, or on the other hand psychological shock, will have a somatic effect, which may become locked into the body.

Our life situation may also result in degrees of persistent tension, which can be experienced as a ‘blocked’ absence of feeling, or a sense of being compressed or contracted. This kind of tension may not be evident because it is a chronic residual tension out of which more acute tensions arise. When they die down, and we go from being 95% tense to being only 50% tense, we feel pretty relaxed! But the sign of this residual tension is a general inability to feel, whereby we can't sense subtler aspects of the body – such as the full rhythm of breathing – or a state of feeling on edge, unable to settle into the body.

Some parts of the body may also be unconsciously gripped by reactions of anger or fear that have become frozen into its somatic sense – so they feel compacted or highly sensitive for no apparent reason. When there are blocks caused by frustration, guilt and rage, they may register in the somatic sense as tightness, or numbness. Ordinarily we may not know this, because our attention avoids these

areas. However, in meditation we check in with the present disposition of the body, part by part, and the somatic sense provides an indicator of experiences that we may have dismissed. Yet, if a felt experience isn't somehow cleared or responded to, it leaves traces in the entire system.

Clearing the experience requires the space to allow it to pass, but this space gets lost if the experience itself is marked as 'wrong' or feels unsafe to allow into full awareness. Thought and speech aren't always capable of comprehending or coming to terms with what is going on, and there are also social restrictions on talking about and expressing intense moods like anger or grief. In such a case a layer of guilt or shame gets added and the pattern is buried rather than cleared. Therefore accessing the somatic impression in the body is a way of meeting and clearing these residues, by translating their felt sense into elemental terms such as hard, fiery, and so on. This curtails spinning out into agitation and proliferation, but allows the feelings to be felt, ventilated and pass.

Afflictions are not all there is! When we notice feeling 'really solid' or 'bright and radiant' or 'light and breezy' or 'flowing', witnessing our emotions in terms of changing elements checks the reactions and the proliferation of thoughts and emotions. Sometimes that's all that's needed, and at other times when we find ourselves becoming rigid or hotheaded or spun-out and blown away, we might need to bring a balancing element to mind – earth to give us firm ground, water to soften and empathise, or space to quell the reactivity. This allows us to experience difficult emotions in a way that doesn't suppress them, but remains empathic and spacious.

Explore how this body expresses itself in its own terms, on what makes the body present for you. While sitting, close your eyes and put aside the visual map of the body or notions about its appearance. Without all that, how do you know you have a body? Fully receive and attune to the sensations, energies and feelings that constitute your 'body-impression.' How would you define it in its own terms...? A certain pressure here... a certain repeated movement here...a tingling and pulsing here...something warm or cool here. This feels hard, this feels heavy, this feels supple and so on.

Notice these elemental experiences: weight, solidity or 'earth'; movement and pressures – air; heat, cold, vitality – fire; moisture and suppleness – water; movement, openness – space. Establish a kind of dialogue – between sensing textures and behaviours that indicate the presence of your body, and checking what concept fits them, using the language of the five elements.

As you practise, you may locate subtler aspects of the elements: the sense of this arm being connected to the shoulder is cohesion, as is the flow of energy from the palm to the fingers. The feeling of inertia, of having gravity, is earth. The sense of fullness in the belly is the pressure of air. Spend time resting your attention in these elements in an open and peaceful way: the weightiness of weight is not good or bad, it's just like this.

As you sit, stand, walk or recline, notice the interweaving of these elements: when any sensation or energy arises, what is its initial impression, even before it is pleasant or unpleasant? It might feel like burning, or perhaps you pick up on the pulse of it. Or you might get the impression of a large mass, or notice how it diffuses: the tingling in the hand ebbing up the wrist and subsiding in the arm like an incoming tide. As an element comes to the fore, be aware of how its quality affects attitude and mood at this time.

Go to the sensed periphery of your body. What is outside of that? You might open your eyes in an oceanic gaze, attuning to the sense of space, of openness rather than any specific object. Acknowledge, in a bodily sense, the space around you; let the body sense and relax into that.

Whenever any tightness or sudden movements occur in the body, or when entering a numb patch, practise generating space around that. Also develop spaciousness as a mental attitude: be spacious, don't resist or hold on to any impressions. Lessen any reactivity by stepping back from impressions if need be. (If you find yourself reacting or catching hold, deliberately shift your attention elsewhere.) To be spacious and yet focused might mean imagining what the tightness would look or feel like. Rather than resisting, reacting, trying to fix it or understand it, give it psychological space.

As you spread awareness around that impression, attend deeply without any other motive than to be present and empathic. Amplify that intention with suggestions like, 'All the time in the world to find a place to be with this....' Widen your focus around the tightness, agitation or numbness. Then smooth attention from the centre out to the periphery of the area. Attuning to air, steadily and repeatedly breathe through the area and out into the space. Allow mind-states and moods to unfold and flow. Over a few minutes you may sense your bodily impression shift to a more comfortable enlarged or settled mode.

When you feel balanced and relaxed, get a good sense of how that feels. There will be a general sense of how the body manifests – it may seem lighter with a less sharply defined periphery for example. It may seem more alive and tingling. Notice also the overall mood, tone and energy of the mind – the thought processes may be more even or subdued.

It may be that there are still disturbances; if so, you can take the practice further.

In the first step, first acknowledge the imbalance in elemental terms: say there is too much pressure. If it is an active pressure, as of some force or energy being engaged, this is air. Then attune to a helpful manifestation of air, such as the swelling and subsiding of the chest or abdomen. Bring that air to bear on the negative air; allow the two senses to meet each other. They will start to overlap and even merge in places. Keep spreading your awareness over the two streams until they come into harmony.

If this doesn't bring around balance, the second step is to try an element that is a counterpart to the elemental sense of the difficulty. In the above example, air is a counterpart to earth. But if the pressure were more a passive one, such as being constricted, we would acknowledge that as water and look for the vital element: 'fire.' This may be found in the tingling of the palms or in the vital warm core within the body. Or imagine the warmth as outside, such as the sun or fire playing on the face or chest. Let things loosen up under these influences.

When you find a sense of balance, allow attention to amplify it. Then gradually, by widening and sweeping attention, draw that sense over the entire body, connecting it to the ground beneath and the space around you. In time this may produce an image that you can dwell upon for firmer concentration.

When you have worked around your body, discerning elements and bringing them into balance, let go and contemplate elements as they arise and pass, and how they affect the perception of the body. Acknowledge that none of this is solid or lasting. Dwell in the awareness that sees that.

Difficulties

It may be that your mind needs support to pick up these elements in a full way. In this case, take your time and imagine the meaning of *firm, rigid*; or *flowing, wishy-washy*; then *bright, fiery*; and *agile restless*; and *spacious, empty*. Are there any body-impressions, even temporary, that line up with those senses?

Work around simple impressions, like the weight of the skull, the bones in the hands, the pressure of the seat on the ground. Water is the most difficult to detect, so leave that until you get more adept.

With a lot of evaluation, and when attuning to any body energy, energies get released that may be unsettling. So work slowly and gently, and avoid analysis or deductions.

If this form doesn't work for you...

Try to recognise how you know the rightness of everyday things: your ability to pick up a plum and know how ripe it is by its degree of firmness: earth element. We can calibrate these elements very clearly when we go to buy or choose something. Maybe you're checking out some ornaments and on picking something up you know it's plastic not brass, because it's doesn't have the weight (earth) or coolness (fire) of metal.

Try contemplating form in these ways: the shape of your own or someone else's form as a form in nature, like a tree, a rock, or a cloud. There can be agreeable or disagreeable feelings around these shapes, but the shapes don't have to be equated as essentially belonging to anyone or anything...a cloud, a stream, a candle flame – shape is the dance performed by the water element.

Further

1 Elemental Regions

The natural centres of earth, fire, water, air and space are respectively: the midriff/solar plexus region: the middle of the forehead, above the nose and between the eyes; the lower abdomen; the chest; and the throat. Placing your attention in any one of these areas may again help you to get a fuller impression of an element in a somatic rather than anatomical sense.

2 Elemental Breathing

You can also contemplate breathing in elemental terms. The breath can then spread that impression and energy over the entire body. For example, the repeated rhythmic flow of the breathing process can be sensed as 'water.' If we then attune to that particular sign and enlarge it in the mind, the body can be experienced as something supple, and the mind feels flexible.

In a similar way, you may sense the breath-energy becoming more like light, the fire element. Then, as you scan the body-impressions you may notice that some parts of your body feel cold or numb. Breathe the fire element through the body for warmth and brightness. The earth at the end of the out-breath may help to ground an unsteady mind. And the breath as air keeps everything momentary and light.

4 Elements and Pain

We can also work with the tightening or contracting sensations around physical pain. In this case, acknowledge the aches and pains in elemental terms: like a rock, like fire. That in itself may cool out the hard reactions to the pain and make it seem less aggressive. Create some space around the pain and then try flowing a diffusive and cool awareness through it by means of the fluid, watery quality of the breath.

Working with mind-states and emotions

The meditation theme that provides the opportunity for most long-term development (as well as challenges) is that of revealing and resolving mind-states. We've already worked on it in terms of dealing with hindrances and cultivating the sublime states, and as the ground of practice becomes more established, it is to the stream of moods and emotions that we return. And we return with an understanding that these states, however troublesome, have a lot of energy and a sensitivity that we don't want to annihilate. Which is just as well, because that stream of emotional energy will always be with us. And it can be checked, handled, opened and transmuted into a refined form of heart-intelligence.

What are generally referred to as mind-states are more usefully understandable as 'heart-states.' Anger, motivation, affection, jealousy: they're a mixed bag. They are strongly emotive, impulsive and at times resistant to reasoned guidance. Although the positive ones are a resource for what is good about human aspiration, the negative ones are a major source of misery. And even the good ones flood the mind with the urge to do, which doesn't allow us to deepen to the rested awareness that is the supreme peace and fullness of the human mind.

Whether they're positive or negative, what we call an emotion is a compound of three factors. These are: firstly, a perception or felt meaning; secondly, a feeling (= the sense of agreeable, disagreeable or neutral); and finally, an activity in terms of an impulse, or reaction – a surge, jump or flush. The ways of handling the emotion are based upon addressing one or another of these factors in isolation from the compounded mix in which they rise up and take hold. This takes mindfulness and investigation, the first two of what are known as the seven factors of Awakening (or enlightenment). These provide us with a way of addressing the 'heart-state' without acting upon it, or suppressing it, approving or disapproving of it. The first two factors open and steady the heart, then the subsequent factors of persistence, rapture, tranquillity, unification and equanimity merge its energies into the base of awareness.

The way in which we generally apply the first two Awakening factors entails separating the activity from the felt meaning that triggers it. Take the case when I feel insulted: when these factors are established, I can contemplate that felt meaning as distinct from the impulse to retort, go into a 'wounded me' program or store up the insult as the foundation for a grudge. Or at least I can *try* to relax any of those activities; or wait for them to subside. (This is not easy work). And how do I do that? First I check the effect, the flush that rises up at the moment of recognising the insult. I may do this by coming into my bodily sense and feeling that impulse- energy rush through my system, gripping my chest, running into my hands, flushing my face, and I hold it mindfully as 'bodily activity' (*kaya-sankhara*). Then maybe in that second or two, I check my breathing and let it go through some gentle full out-breaths, breathing through the bodily activity.

Well, if I've got this far without retorting or suppressing, congratulations! And with that sense of self-respect, some assurance arises and I realise I don't have to drop to the level of snapping back. And I don't have to pick up the insult as anything to do with me. As the Buddha himself remarked, if someone offers you something and you don't pick it up, then the offering stays with the donor. Which is a non-judgemental way of handing it back.

It may subsequently be appropriate for me to respond by asking what the other person is feeling or pointing out the effect that their comments can have for themselves as well as others. Then again, I may in due course investigate the negative perception that the other person has thrown at me, and how I'm affected by a remark about my physical appearance or behaviour. (Most perceptions have some

truth in them.) Can I look again at my behaviour – or is the truth of the matter mostly about the other person’s attitude? Then without necessarily deciding, I just hold the sense, the felt meaning of dissonance, of conflict, of hurt and reactivity, independent of the personalities – and compassion arises. So the felt meaning doesn’t have to be translated into a final truth as to who is the innocent and who is the guilty party; instead it is held as an expression of that heart-sensitivity itself. And when we don’t create good guys and bad guys, crime and punishment and blame, our awareness deepens into a melting sensitivity. There it can widen with the recognition of our common humanity and come to rest.

This is a way in which a mind-state ‘empties’ into a sensitive inner peace; it’s not a matter of eradicating an emotion but of holding, respectfully receiving it and letting its *sankhara* transmute. When you get to experience that, you find two further developments become available. Firstly you get the encouragement to unlock certain buried or frozen emotional states, states which don’t manifest except as an absence of ease or confidence or trust in others. This ‘frozen’ syndrome may be due to suppression of emotions that were taboo or not allowed – such as grief or fear or rage. It’s also the case that some tendencies may be deeply embedded because the felt-meaning carries such a powerful trigger that it’s very difficult to disconnect it from the reaction. Something like depression or resentment may have become so built in to how I sense myself that it’s really stuck. In some cases my mind gathers around it in order to establish a familiar sense of self. In severe cases this is the area for help from a therapist. But it’s also possible for us to work on ourselves, on our embedded neuroses, passions and pains with the understanding that these can open into expressions of a heart-sensitivity that is our human gift. Opening these over a period of time is one of the possibilities of **‘Deep Attention and Investigation’** (qv).

The second further development is to transcend more ‘positive’ states of excitement and attachment. We start to grow out of attachment to pleasure and success when we sense there is a happiness that is steadier and doesn’t need feeding. And the process is much the same as outlined above: to check the activity and to investigate the perception. Is my happy feeling over dinner or promotion (or whatever) satisfying? And after a while, doesn’t it take me away from being present and content with myself, and limit my feelings of compassion and concern for others? Reflecting like this is a way of placing even one’s creature comforts and pleasures into the focus of inquiry – and why not? In this instance, the use of the exercise outlined in this **Deep Attention** section under ‘Investigation of mind-states’ may be useful.

When all else fails (as will happen from time to time), the essential first step is to stop the train of thoughts that a mind-state produces. An undeveloped heart can’t handle the triggers of rage or depression or obsessive lust. So when you find yourself getting locked into anger, jealousy or craving, then it’s time to get more pro-active. When your child is wandering into the road, do you suggest she/he contemplate the traffic or become more aware of their feelings? There is a time to just grab the mind and haul it out of the traffic. If you’re heading into overwhelm, come back to the body, stand up, open your eyes, walk up and down. This is parenting the heart – with patience and compassion, of course.

And lastly, although we may feel stuck in mind-sets like depression or anxiety, this doesn’t have to be the case. It’s also possible to deliberately induce and sustain mind-states that are clarifying and supportive. This is through bringing to mind and sustaining helpful recollections. This is a basic practice that can be developed as an introduction to any meditation period, or used for reflection at any time of day. Examples of some of these are in the following **‘Recollections.’**

Recollections

Recollection on Mortality

Recollection and reflection on mortality, one's own and that of any other person, help to prune the tangle that emotions can get into. It helps us to sieve out what is really important from what is superficial. As a daily practice it's recommended that one consider the inevitability and unpredictability of one's own death. This means bringing to mind the idea of dying and witnessing what happens in the heart. There may be a resistance to even considering the topic, there may be fear and confusion. So notice that, feel that in your body and breathe through that. When things settle, try introducing the topic again; as one arrives at emotional acceptance, there is a sense of dispassion. This allows for a careful review of what you're doing with your life in the present, and of what you're carrying in your heart.

In the light of death and vulnerability, feeling jealous about someone else's new suit or home in the sun loses its drive. And why bother hanging onto grudges if you might die tonight? However, this also means that if there's something that is important to you, then check it out, contemplate why it feels precious. You may then explore that sense through the lens of one of the following reflections. And as these practices make the meaning more clear, you can then look at ways to prioritise living it out.

Recollection of kamma

Consider that every mind-state that rises up is a caused and temporary thing, set going by causes and conditions. It's not some permanent identity and it is triggered not by a personal aim, but by what people say, by the way that one assumes things to be, by getting or not getting what we want, by sickness, health and circumstances – in brief by causes and conditions. In itself then, it's not a person or a personal possession. However it does leave results – pleasant or painful. We do have to experience these. If such feelings and mind-states are taken personally they will trigger off more mind-states – to get more, to make things different and so on. So you get the result of agitation, desire or aversion, and identification with all this. This is what's meant by 'kamma.'

Another point is that how we see and relate to each other is through our mental perceptions and responses – good or bad. When we reflect on kamma, we know there's a lot of it, and it directs our minds. Therefore, for our own welfare and that of others, it's vital to be able to check the mind and steer it towards generating good kamma, such as patience, sense-moderation, truthfulness and nonviolence.

There's a good chance that with some empathy and mutual respect, my kammically produced mind-state and yours will be able to get on with each other, co-operate and learn a few things. Without generating good kamma, it's not a sure thing at all. All the conflict that humans have with each other throughout the world comes down to not practising in line with this.

Recollection on Buddha, or the sacred

Imagine or use a photograph or other image to bring to mind the impression of someone you trust deeply. If you can't think of anyone in particular, imagine what it would be like to be trusted, or received with warmth. Do this slowly, by coming out of your head and into your body: imagine for example the feeling of sitting in warm water, or warm light, or a safe and happy place. Notice then, and let your body sense the absence of difficulties – the absence of threat, or of pressure, or of being in a hurry. Do this slowly and repeatedly because although we're often acutely aware of what's wrong, we generally don't notice what's unproblematic. Let your body-mind dwell in what that 'no problem'

place feels like – whether there is a sense of relief or of slowing down or of buoyancy; whether you feel more spacious; whether your breath-rhythm changes and so on.

Take a heart ‘photograph’ of that state and dwell in it. How would you describe that impression: is it of something large or small, hard or soft, mobile or static? How would you describe it in terms of elements? Could you say whether it is light or dark, or even give it a colour? How does it make you feel? When you have a good fix on this feeling, contemplate and rest your attention in it. This is your own image of the sacred, your personal Buddha. Go to it frequently with love and respect. Then it will give its vitality to the awareness of whatever currents rise up in the heart – and will let those currents pass through. (see also ‘**Great Heart**’)

Deep Attention and Investigation

Moods and mind-states tell us how we're feeling and form the basis of how we respond. I'm feeling positive, so I have an optimistic or positive mind-set. This mind-set gives rise to an overall sense of who I am—inferior, or well-liked. However this mind-set and the states that support it, do shift, so my apparent position and identity goes up and down. In meditation we learn to review and address mind-states and feelings as they are, without making them into an identity, or trying to be an identity that has a steady mind-state or doesn't have negative feelings. To contemplate moods and attitudes as they are is important because if we take their messages of how I am and turn them into who I am, or blindly act upon or repress them, these mind-states become fixed as aspects of *me*. From this self-view we may even earnestly want to change who we are...but wanting alone just doesn't work. Then the frustration of not being able to change makes the fixed sense even more solid. In some cases, the fixedness is so stuck that we give upon ourselves; then the state dips below the horizon of awareness and turns into an underlying attitude that taints everything we do. 'Life is like this, people are like that, that's all I'll ever be, why bother trying to change anything?'

Any problem is made worse by self-view. Self-view prevents us from bringing mindful awareness onto a difficult state because it brings up a blur of opinions about 'how I should be' and 'I shouldn't be feeling this way' and 'What's wrong with me?' Sometimes it is stuck so close to the heart that it's like wallpaper in the living room – you hardly notice it, let alone investigate it. So the familiar sense of who I am retains old habits rather than releasing them: from that place we either assume that 'I'm fine the way I am' or 'I am basically a mess/failure.' Both of these self-views keep us stuck in our habits. There is a way of becoming a better person, but it's through directly addressing suffering and stress. This means being clear and skilful with regard to whatever mind-state arises. In this respect mindful awareness allows us to no longer buy into and feed old habits, and the skills that develop through working on the mind bring joy, ease and wisdom to the mind.

To prevent the contemplation of our mental habits becoming a self-absorbed obsession, we develop an inquiry into what supports or causes the mental state. The Buddha considered deep attention (*yoniso manasikara*) to be a valuable asset in the process of such inquiry. Deep attention takes a train of thought or a topic and keeps referring it not to my identity, but to whether it evokes suffering or alleviates it. It goes under the topic of thought to the mind-set (say, of worry or of compassion) that underpins it. Then when mindfulness holds the thought with that reference we can then investigate: 'Is this something I want to encourage?' And if not: 'What does this mind-set depend on?' 'What would it be like without this mind-set?' And 'What does it need to find release?'

For example, we may begin with deliberately reflecting on a topic of personal concern. Maybe we're thinking about a friend or relative. Deep attention may reveal a train of thoughts as based on the mood of regret; then rather than dismiss the feeling, or add more regret, we respond to the suffering or stress that's present in the mind. In many cases what's needed is kindness towards ourselves and others. And that begins with acceptance of the mind-state as a state. We don't have to make into an identity. Then when there is acceptance and a response, it allows the state to change.

At other times the investigation might deepen into an investigation of any mind-state, even positive ones. Mind-states such as happiness tend to hold attention. With investigation into this effect, we can feel any underlying attachment to that state as a certain tightening or contraction of awareness. Negative states condition a tension in the mind as it tries to get rid of that feeling. Positive ones condition a tension to hold on or increase the duration or the intensity of the feeling. But if we could feel the feeling just as a feeling, *rather than me and mine*, then we can relax a little and let it move through. In this way 'investigation of mind-states' (*dhamma-vicaya*) supports letting go and freedom of mind.

Of course this process has to be accompanied by kindness and forgiveness where necessary (and sometimes, the difficulty is in forgiving oneself). These qualities will come a lot easier if we just find a

way out of the spin of blaming, or even trying to get rid of the unpleasant mood. So a basic resource is to ground attention in the body, and further to feel the bodily affect – the tension in the throat or sinking in the belly – and keep mindfulness there. So we refer the felt meaning of an event or a thing, to the inner bodily sense. We don't have to explain it, or go into the story that accompanies it. What is the effect of that 'regret' sense – a hard ball in the diaphragm, a wavering jelly in the pit of the stomach? In this way, we turn the attention's aim from solving or avoiding into one of investigation. Then, 'What does this feeling need?' And then we let any answer – maybe space, or a deep breath – come from the body. That release allows the mind-set to shift by itself. We don't have to fix it.

Essentially the new approach is one of empathy: what would the sense need, what does it want to do or be? Then the theme of the practice is to do nothing but to keep attending with mindfulness and empathy. What may occur is an intuitive realization regarding the problem that triggered the feeling: we may decide to visit the relative or write a meaningful letter, and that feels right and genuine. Or the resolution may be in terms of a shift of attitude around responsibility. Maybe that helps us to value ourselves and yet also be attuned to how we affect others. We have come out of the 'self' of our habitual strategies into a broader and more balanced response.

Establish a supportive bodily presence, a sense of uprightness. Connect to the ground beneath and the space above and around the body. Acknowledge sitting within a space, taking all the time and space that you need.

Establish the overall bodily sense through feeling the breathing: first in the abdomen, allowing the breath to descend through the soft tissues....feel the flexing of the breath in respiration. Relax the shoulders and open the connecting tissues between the upper arms and the main trunk...Feel the breathing flexing the chest, giving all the space that is needed.

Open the head by relaxing the jaw and settling the tongue in the floor of the mouth. As if you were removing a scarf, or unbuttoning a collar, let the neck and throat feel free. Feel the breathing move through the throat. Relax any holding around the eyes, the forehead and the temples. Sense any attitudes of tightening or preparation...
take some time to do nothing. Trust a restful awareness.

If you feel unsettled – snagging flurries or sags of energy or mood – draw attention down your back to the ground, allowing the front of the body to flex freely with the breathing; loosen up in the abdomen. Attune to the rising breath – up through the chest and throat – if you feel heavy or flat. Using these references, gradually step out of your world of functions, events and relationships, and into the space of embodied awareness....all the time in the world to be just this.....

Then allow an aspect of your daily world into awareness; something that nags or weighs in your mind. There may be a few, so choose one that heads the list and feel it out: maybe it's the 'so much to do...'; or the 'I really need this'; or the 'they shouldn't be like this'....Contemplate the effect in terms of the body; sense how the emotion moves energy or holds tension in bodily terms.

This effect may feel familiar, and you may want to shrug it off or accept it. Maybe the whole thing is held in aversion, or an unwillingness to deal with the topic. But rather than do that, create an attentive space around the original sense and the responses that come up.

For example, maybe there's some resignation or frustration: is it ok to be with that, just for a while? Let the breathing and the giving flex through that. Don't make an issue out of concentrating on breathing; widen and soften your awareness and feel whatever seems connected to the breath-rhythm in the body. Sense the breathing as a feeling that steadies you in your body.

As the mind relaxes its unwillingness to be with the feeling, there may be a shift to a deeper, more

volatile feeling – such as grief or anger. Try to sense the effects of these in the body, and curtail any thinking about the topic. If it seems too intense, keep your eyes open and strengthen your ground in the body. You can do this by steadying your breathing, or by gently squeezing your hands, or by moving around. Let the energies of the emotion move and keep a sympathetic awareness of all this.

Keep the inquiry in mind: ‘What does this need? What gives this some room to be?’ (rather than ‘What should I do?’). Attune to the empathic spirit of that inquiry, but don’t try to change anything. Bear this in mind until you feel that something has shifted in your response, or that it has given you a key to deeper understanding. Compassion towards the response may arise, something that relieves you from aggravating, defending or burying it.

Conclude by coming back to the body: the central structure and the soft tissues wrapped around that, the skin around that, the space around all that. Slowly open your eyes, attuning to the space and the sense of the place that you’re sitting in. Consider how that aspect of your world is now.

Difficulties

Inquiry can go wrong if it is not systematic – if we jump in, or push forward into emotional currents with the idea of ‘getting to the root of all this,’ we may find ourselves overwhelmed. The systematic training is to start with just being able to hold the problem mindfully, and then attend to what it feels like in general to be with this problem. It is this very sense of ‘being stuck with this’ that must first of all be accommodated. The stuckness may feel tense and uptight, or held down and numb, or bristling and excited. It will generally demand action: even if it is the seductive plea to dull out these thoughts in activity or sleep. So first try to stay conscious with that rather than dull out, or move onto another topic. Get a reference through resonance and evaluation – ‘the mood feels tight, hard’ and then inquire into that mood, as to what it needs or where it is. What does it feel like in the body? And where is it being felt? In the chest, head or belly?

Remember just to empathise; don’t do anything. Let any shift happen and any suggestions come intuitively – after the shift into mindful awareness. Take your time and stay grounded. A long-term problem might not unwind in one session, maybe it’s ok just to be less reactive to it.

Another problem can be that we have an idea of what we want to investigate...but right now it isn’t manifesting. We can try to be more in charge of our moods than they actually allow us to be. This is a problem when we have an analytical mind-set, and are keen on getting things all figured out. More to the point, if that is the case, is to investigate the emotive base of that very mind-set.

At other times, the problem is that things seem too vague and nothing special is going on. Fine. You can always return to mindfulness of breathing...or spreading kindness...or perhaps just ask the question: ‘Is there anything here which prevents me from feeling really at ease?’ Maybe that vague ‘nothing going on’ is a dull state masking other feelings. Sometimes our system just sedates or numbs out when there is seemingly unresolvable frustration, loneliness or a loss of meaning in life...Maybe this isn’t the time to investigate that, but at least it’s good to stay with the dull, slightly sleepy state with a sense of empathy and attention. This encourages the unfolding of the mind-state in its own time.

If this form doesn't help you...

Rather than looking for in-depth reasons and causes, allow yourself to follow how a train of thought operates, how it goes from this topic to that. When you can witness that, try articulating to yourself any aspects of how it felt. For example: ‘it started off slowly and drifted, then it picked up some speed and seemed excited, then it felt happy or angry, and then...’

Try writing a ‘stream-of-consciousness’ piece which is just a record of five minutes of your mental

flow. You don't have to get every detail.

Further

The Inner Critic

Very often we come across states and voices in our minds which are almost like people in their own right. One such character is the inner critic. The inner critic is a voice that blames, complains about, and belittles us. It demands that we be wiser, happier, purer than we are right now, and often picks up and broods over aspects of ourselves that we dislike or feel ashamed of. It also brings up our past shortcomings in a judgemental way. Meanwhile, in the present it criticises or ridicules our efforts; it can never offer any encouragement, appreciation or empathy.

When this is running, direct your attention to the feeling of the persona, that inner critic itself. Shift from the topic to the mind-state that's doing the commentary. Who is this? Who's telling who how you should be, or how things should be, or how other people should be? How does that voice or energy feel? Contemplate its very texture as contracted or tense or agitated and let it be that way. Hold it carefully like it's a child having a tantrum, or someone in a fit. Listen to it in an empathic way: How do I feel about being with this? Can the sense of empathy and acceptance extend to include this one?

If you can extend some empathy or just be calm and present with the critic then ask, 'How does the critic feel? What would it be like to be this one? What does it need?' (Remember to not provide or even look for an answer. Just provide the sense of empathic inquiry.)

There may be other characters: such as the 'have a good time' voice that says we should just relax and not get so intense; or the victim who has always been unfairly treated; or the hero who takes him/herself very seriously...and so on. Practise with these in a like fashion.

Direct investigation of the mind

Get a feel for a mind-state. Refer to it in more concrete terms as heavy or bright, warm or hard, without translating it instinctively into an idea that carries all kinds of reflex reactions. If we call a mind-state 'depression' it automatically is held as bad and something to get rid of. But in that scenario, I can't get rid of it – I can't get the energy or the inspiration to come out of the depression, because I'm too depressed to do so. That sense of helplessness then adds to my depression. However when if the mind-state is experienced as a sense of falling inwards and downwards into something grey and heavy, it's possible to get a feel for that, and contemplate it. First try to feel the sense of being well and steady — wherever that is. Then, refer to it extend it to include the whole body, breathe through it, and perhaps slow the breathing down to cause the breath-energy to brighten. This then acts as a counterbalance to the constrictive effects of a negative mind-state.

As you get more skilled at doing this, breathe the positive effect, or let it rest and flow through the negative effect – slowly, with all the time in the world and with no wish to fix, remove or understand the negative state.

Mudita: Sharing in Joy

Mudita means ‘appreciative (or empathic) joy.’ It’s the happiness that arises from appreciating other people’s (or one’s own) good fortune. It comes from acknowledging the basic happiness, the freedom from pain, fear or grief that all beings seek. It can also be sensed as the buoyancy that occurs when we touch into well-being or whenever a difficulty ceases – even temporarily. This quality, which flows into appreciation, contentment and gratitude is tremendously nourishing. It is however, something we lose contact with. Often we’re dwelling in the future with desire or anxiety or in the past...and even in the present, the mind snags on what we find irritating, and is programmed to imagine how much better things could be than they are right now. It takes an effort to imagine how much worse things could be! This critical program motivates us in terms of discovery and invention, but it’s numb to appreciation and contentment. Without the balance of being able to appreciate the good fortune, the relief from pain and distress that we have right now, the mind gets stuck with the inner critic, the voice of complaint and negativity. This faultfinding negativity can dog everything we do and snipe at other people as well. We don’t see the good things that we/they do or we see our own or others’ unskilful actions as some kind of permanent identity. When this critic (called *āraṭi* in Buddhism) takes over, cynicism, jealousy and more subtly, indifference, also grow. They make our hearts gloomy, petty and contracted. And even when it’s just that sense of resignation, *āraṭi* closes down access to well-being and joy.

It’s good to consider what gets in the way of this natural joy. Factors such as perfectionism, performance drive and goal orientation will have the *āraṭi* side effect unless they’re balanced with appreciation. Meditation itself gets tense when we expect results and neglect a sense of appreciation. It’s important to cultivate a sense of respect for the aspiration and commitment that gets us to meditate in the first place. I generally advise meditators to reflect and dwell on the goodness that is already there in terms of ethical sensitivity and integrity and let the heart fill with that at the beginning of a meditation session. Effort requires nourishment: it’s the common sense measure of putting gas in the tank when setting out on a journey.

As with the other bases of kindness and empathy, once we put aside the differences in personality and status, it’s easy to refer to other people as much the same as ourselves. We sympathize with their suffering and shortcomings, and are gladdened by their happiness and goodness. So it’s skilful to keep returning to the basics in oneself and others, to attune to the specific presence of people and things without adding comparisons of self with others or past with future.

We can let go of the tendency to judge in terms of who deserves what, and how things should be: who knows? And where does happiness arise from – in ourselves and in others? It’s through appreciation, not through accountancy – and appreciation of our own humanity is something that a downturn of fortune doesn’t deprive of us of. So when we cultivate *mudita*, it’s based not on who deserves what, but on the wish that we or others get in touch with our innate goodness. And it promotes self-improvement: whoever is more appreciative is going to be more contented, less demanding and irritable. As a consequence, they’re going to act a lot more skilfully.

When we attune to a fundamental sense of being, rather than just our personality or our current concerns, we can be simply open and present. It’s through this, rather than adding a whole list of approvals, that we arrive quite naturally at appreciative joy.

While sitting, standing, walking or reclining, cultivate appreciation with reference to yourself...

Centre your awareness in your body, being aware of the general form, the central core and the breathing. Explore the relatedness of all this: the whole body being an interplay between the light flow of breathing and the firm stability of the body’s mass. Acknowledge the inner space of the body and the outer space around it, with the breathing connecting the two – now reaching out, now reaching in...a sharing sense.

Every few moments a breath comes to be. Every few moments the shared air enters, permeates, saturates the body. Every few moments the body empties its breath into the shared air. Let yourself be held in this interplay.

Finer even than breath, each moment mind comes to be. Thoughts, attention, moods well up and move out into the silence. Each moment, something is received, a sight, sound, touch or intuition. Some with purpose, some without; some with reaction, some with just a faint resonance of awareness. Sense the present vibrancy.

Acknowledge the conscious system that you are— living from one moment to the next. Who or what is that? Cultivate a sense of wonder and then of thankfulness. Dwell with that for a while.

Consider your own body, the parents whose genes established it, and the many life forms that sustain it. Allow your mood to be part of that sustenance by appreciating your body. In doing that attune and enjoy the participation which that sense affords.

Enjoy, with mindful awareness rather than thoughts, your own presence. Attune to the specific uniqueness of how that is right now. Appreciate your presence. Acknowledge any need for boundaries, such as the wish to be private or unnoticed: appreciate that protective function but check whether now there is a need for defence. Notice how the defended sense affects your body. If the present space around your body, chest, throat, etc. is safe...can the body relax? Work on laying a boundary aside, temporarily. Feel a little freer.

Soften the impulse to do or be something special. All that you need right now is here.

Allow yourself to feel open and keep acknowledging the nourishment that the air is bringing you, the steadiness of the ground beneath and the willing receptivity of the knowing space that wraps around you. Feel the steady support of your own bodily centre.

Enrich this mood with reference to wholesome actions that you have done or kindly aspirations that you have, or ongoing intentions for supporting others. These recollections, which the contracted mind obscures, may now be more apparent. Give yourself time to recollect, sense and get a feeling for them. Where does this ethical and compassionate sensitivity arise from now? Where is the source of the great heart?

Practise extending appreciation to others:

Recollect an occasion when you felt that your presence was enjoyed by another person. Recall how that felt, return to that feeling and try to stay within that in the present.

Acknowledge that you're part of a creation in which beings live a moment at a time, with a consciousness turned towards looking after and protecting themselves. Recognize in all of them the vitality that rises up, the wish to be alive that living beings have. Attune to the well-being that the resources of the planet bring. Join in their interest that this well-being not be parted from them.

While staying centred, practise introducing the perception of others. Sense the joy that arises when a person meets again a dear friend or a relative that they have been separated from. Attune to the happiness that occurs when someone attains a goal that they had been working for. Acknowledge that it does not lessen you. Stay connected to the arising of the happiness that you feel they have.

Work through the perceptions of those one feels are worthy of good fortune, then advantaged, then privileged. Consider them as happy. Stay connected to your own ability to empathize when you bring to mind people who have greater good fortune than yourself. Stay connected to the sense of happiness but let go of whose it is.

Introduce the perceptions of people who are worthy and who have little good fortune, but not much suffering. Attune to the inner strength and contentment that they may have.

Acknowledge people living in hardship who have to develop intelligence to bring themselves to safety and well-being. Appreciate the skills and strengths that living beings develop in order to sustain life. Remember the happiness that arises when one comes out of deprivation or trouble and into comfort. May all beings find their way out of suffering!

Introduce the perception of people who experience a lot of suffering. Attune to the simplicity of the relief related to any lessening of suffering, and the ability for people even in states of deprivation to bear with their suffering and care for their families or friends. As you recognize this fundamental strength, also appreciate its support in your life and in that of others.

Difficulties

The obvious difficulties associated with *mudita* are faultfinding, jealousy and indifference. With all of these, one thing that helps is to acknowledge how unpleasant these make our own minds and hearts. Secondly, that these all stem from a particular focus – they are not objective truth. Focus, or attention, is a conditioned factor and in all these cases it isn't bearing the whole picture in mind. With indifference, attention doesn't even extend very far. It only takes a glimpse and omits any reference to the heart of conscience and concern. So when that mode prevails, it may be that we're just overloaded with concerns or defending ourselves against being affected. Then it's good to take time to recollect one's own well-being, how one feels right now.

When attention goes into faultfinding, maybe we've lost touch with the context or the specific character of the person that we're finding fault with. Maybe their actions were clumsy, or that piece of language felt offensive...but perhaps he/she/I was acting in haste or from a reflex...or maybe that's as good as we could get it right now. How can we help someone or ourselves improve? Maybe if first of all, we acknowledge their good side and speak to that about the concerns we feel. A good person will want to know where they're short of the mark or letting themselves and others down. First of all, we have to get in touch with 'the good person.' That's what *mudita* is about.

With jealousy, the point to bear in mind is that other people's good fortune needn't diminish your own well-being. If you allow it to, you'll always be in trouble. Guard the well-being of an appreciative and contented heart.

A less apparent difficulty is that one gets too excited with *mudita*. Contemplate the snatchy quality of excitement and how it reduces clarity, balance and mindfulness. Rest back a little.

If this doesn't work for you...

You may benefit from taking interest in the natural world. Explore just for the sense of interest and discovery. Take up exercise that puts you in touch with how the body works. From there you may find interest in observing and being part of group activities where some of that enjoyment comes from the shared sense – trekking, a hobby and so on. Consider that no matter who or what else seems to be the source of that happiness, actually it's arising in your mind or heart. Notice where and how that is.

Further

Settle into and contemplate the quality of *mudita*:

Move from considering any object or person into the awareness that attunes to the joy of sharing. Where does this ethical and compassionate sensitivity arise from now? Where is this great heart?

Contemplate that sense, letting the mind take in the boundlessness of that. Acknowledge that dualities

of 'you', 'me' and 'how he/she was', are a play of consciousness. Sense the separateness of beings to be like currents in the wind that give the wind its manifest qualities. Trust, or be thankful for, that wind.

After an appropriate period of time, return to the interplay of the breath, and allow your sense of yourself to get re-established. Welcome this as you would a friend coming home from a long journey.

Breathing through States of Mind

This instruction brings mindfulness of breathing directly onto the affective mind. Previously we attended to the breathing in bodily terms to get our somatic energies straightened out and flowing steadily; now we turn to the psychological and emotional realms. Body, then mind: it's presented in that order because attending to the body has a good effect on the mind – makes it fit to work on itself.

In the Buddha's presentation of this theme, there are four points: to breathe with sensitivity to rapture, with sensitivity to ease, with sensitivity to the mental energy (*citta-sankhara* – literally 'mental activities') and then to breathe calming and soothing this energy. This is the energy of mental sensitivity that, as it ripples creates states of mind.

'States of mind' can mean attitudes, emotions, or impulses. So this practice is about how we're feeling. To be more accurate, the meditation isn't based on any particular state, so much as the handling of the energy that keeps pumping them out. It takes us into our tendencies to overreact or under-respond, to withdraw or get excited or irritable. These tendencies make up our mental/emotional profiles, and the specific ways in which each individual feels and responds, feels overwhelmed or undernourished. It governs how each of us assesses things and responds – and even how we sense ourselves and the world. When I'm feeling angry or threatened, I may sense myself as a victim of a deceitful and uncaring society, and form cynical views about others. In the world in general, this kind of thing is going on all the time. Even when our emotional patterns are relatively moderate and acceptable, the fixity of their profile makes our lives tedious and habitual. But in meditating on this, we're not trying to have an emotional facelift but rather to acknowledge these patterns. Then we're less likely to act upon them or react to them. So whether it's sky-blue elation, pink serenity, glittering fantasies, smouldering grudges, or muddy moods and doubts – we aim to meet them all without aversion or wavering. Then we can handle and release any tendency to get stuck.

We do this by using the breathing to tone up our receptivity and mental energy. The rule of thumb is to put the mental and emotional topics to one side when we begin the meditation and get a solid foundation in the body. Then we tap into the underlying energy that feeds and is affected by body and mind – the nervous energy if you like. We steady and spread this through the whole of the body and this brings around relief, refreshment and quiet happiness. Tuning into that happiness uplifts the mind and as one attends to that quality, a sense of buoyancy arises. This is called 'rapture.' Rapture occurs dependent on the awareness being released from the constrictive effect of the hindrances. It has physiological and emotional effects, ranging between a sense of connectedness, of flow, of uplift, of wonder, of joy, or of elation: from a sense of zestful presence to quite turbulent thrills. An analogy likens rapture to the uplift that would occur in the mind of a thirsty traveller in the desert who sees a lake in the near distance. The overall quality of the experience is a heightening or intensification of awareness with a pleasurable feeling. 'Ease' (*sukha*) is what occurs when, using the previous analogy, one has drunk the water. Ease is a pleasurable feeling (*vedana*), whereas rapture is an energised, but unsteady, activity (*sankhara*).

Through spreading and softening the energy of rapture the mind can shift to the more satisfied state of ease. Tuning in to this enables us to attend to inner ease, rather than chasing after pleasure on the external plane. This source of happiness is based purely on mindfulness and nonattachment – on stepping out of the stream of mental topics rather than adding new topics. Then there's no need to compete with anyone else, or feel disadvantaged by social status. In fact we're not even trying to get rapturous, but rather to tune into and breathe through our minds. Rapture will come by itself if we're clear and attuned to breathing, and it isn't even the main point of the practice. Rapture can support the process of settling and understanding mental energy – but it can be a sidetrack and obscure that process if the mind gets obsessed with it.

The main theme of this practice is to handle the energy that gets stirred up by memories and moods and free it from that basis. Ordinarily, an image pops into the mind about someone or something, and we find ourselves inspired, dejected, angry or elated. The activation-energy shifts in accordance with the flow of mental perceptions and images – and the flow just keeps moving from one clip to the next. One pushed button triggers off another and so on. We can be busy in the present getting steamed up about an event that happened a decade ago, or we can be guessing at how things could be. Perception is mesmerising; that's why for liberation it has to be handled and steadied. When we can do this, we recognize that those memory clips and dreams are just that – like old movies that don't do much more than stir and express our passions. Sometimes we like doing this because it makes us feel alive. But when there's a steady flow of bright feeling through meditation, memories and passions feel rough and unsatisfying. Because this causes the appetite for new passions to wane, it brings around shifts in one's psychology. Beware! Meditate frequently and you could start feeling contented...

So this practice gives us insight into what moves our hearts and minds, and how precarious and random that flow of perceptions normally is. We also get to know for ourselves that a shift to peace and coolness isn't only good in theory but personally manageable – and enjoyable too.

Focus on how breathing feels as you settle into your bodily awareness. It may feel soft or warm or bright. Let the process of evaluation handle the breath-impression, admiring it and working it through the impression of the body. How does the rhythm and energy of the in-breath and the out-breath feel? What is the specific quality of that rhythm?

Let the breath-energy move through any perceived boundaries in the body, while staying connected to the core of in and outflow. Acknowledge and mollify the tensions between the joints or around tight muscles or withheld places in the chest, abdomen, head or throat. If the body doesn't completely relax, relax the resistance to, or concern about that. Smooth and quieten the energy of the breathing, like softening your voice to speak quietly to someone close-up. Keep working with this until the in-breathing and out-breathing feel the same, and there seem to be no breaks in the energy-flow.

In the course of doing this, the mind will try to revert to its more habitual energy-flow by bringing up more stimulating images and memories and topics that arouse worry, desire, regret or irritation. Without reacting to these, feel their energy and breathe through them. The stimulation will generally have a speeding, tightening or destabilising effect, so incline towards slowing down, widening and softening. Maintain the central focus on the breathing, and widen and soften as if the breath were spreading through your tight or speedy state like a soft mist, having no aim and creating no conflict with how you're feeling. Keep doing this in a consistent and gentle way.

Notice the voices and moods that the mind brings up and how they feel like you; notice their importance and intensity and attend at first to the easier ones. Be patient and breathe a steady softening and widening energy through them. As you do so, you may notice effects on the overall mood: you may feel more spacious or tender or quiet. Some of the moods and voices that you've always followed get to seem like visitors rather than the host. As this sense deepens, some of those moods and voices may quietly slip out the back door.

At any moment when the inner chatter stops and your attention fully connects with the breathing, notice the mental energy steady and relax. Enhance that effect by inquiry and evaluation: imagine what the breathing seems like in terms of the elements; say there's a sense of groundedness or warmth or light. There may be an impression of space or silence, or a colour or a brightness. These may not be

distinct at first, but they give an impression that is calm and full of quiet attention. As the quality of calm gets more fully established, work on the more stubborn 'I am always this, I need to be that' voices and moods.

When the mind gets quieter, let the attention meet and merge with the breath-impression, so that the mind becomes that bright and calm sense. Gradually let the more deliberate action of focusing come to rest. Feel the sensitivity and vibrancy of the awareness, and rather than holding on to it, let it hold the mind. Note that vibrant state and the finer, more rested feeling that comes periodically when even that vibrancy quiets—like watching a wild bird wheel and soar. Give it space, content to let it flutter and swoop, occasionally settling before rising up again. As you grow more comfortable with the process of rapture, give the breathing away, letting it be still and open, not your own. Be the awareness, vibrant and sensitive, and acknowledge the finer more rested feeling at the fading ripple of the sensitivity. Rest that into the breath-impression. As evaluation becomes still, acknowledge and settle comfortably into the feeling of being held.

After a suitable period of time or when awareness begins to flutter, move towards the intention, then the activity, of discrimination. But slowly and mindfully: don't snap out of the absorption, but begin exercising evaluation on how it is right now, establish evaluation in the present on the sense of hereness, and enjoy that. Let that separate into a sense of a subject, a witness, attending to the rhythm of the breathing as an object. Then feel out the form of the body, its structures and movements.

Difficulties

When the mind does get stuck in its moods and memories, focus not on the topic, but on the way of handling its energy. For a start, regularise the breath-impression with thoughtfulness and evaluation. It's like the way a mother cat cleans her kitten with her tongue. She holds it firmly but gently and keeps working over the kitten's fur with a caring and attentive vigour. Settling is not just a matter of calming down, it also means working steadily. However the breath-impression is sensed, get a hold of it and work it clean of dust and tangles.

If many images and perceptions arise, keep returning to the body and cooling the energy by shifting to the breathing out, especially by breathing out through the soles of the feet and palms of the hands, or anywhere that feels less charged.

Kindness and patience as attitudes and widening and softening the attention span are helpful. So

if you experience anxiety or agitation when you relax deliberately applied attention, attitudes like trust, lightness of touch, and receptivity are helpful. Rest in the qualities of the uplifted mind to allow that 'handing over' of the will.

A later difficulty comes when one is fascinated by the quality of rapture – whether it's present or just a hankered-after fantasy. The core of the obstacle is our need to have fascinating and rapturous experiences, so the mind hangs on and gets greedy. Then we fall into the error of being convinced that a mind-state can be real and lasting. If we can't manage to get it or maintain it, we get frustrated. On the other hand, if we are able to sustain a rapturous mind-state for a period of time, it can give rise to conceit.

These problems are best addressed by careful review as to the stressful nature of pushing and holding on. All mind-states depend on some conscious or unconscious holding. What or who is holding?

Who or what do I want to be or have? This helps us reveal the sense of self that is doing the practice. Who is that? Do you believe in them? Or isn't he/she another visitor pretending to be the owner of the mind? Contemplate the changeable nature of mental energy and refer to the subsiding aspect of each uplifting surge; or if it seems continual, to the nature of being affected – the overwhelmed effect. Try listening in to that overexcited effect and respond by being spacious and patient. This helps over-reactivity quieten down.

What needs to be attended to with any agreeable result is the tendency to try to create more. We may have had an insight and wish to return to it or we may have read of someone else's insight and try to replicate it. With this, we get pushy again. We miss the vital point of attending to the process as it happens, or we get impatient and skip stages in a process. All this jars and tangles our mental sensitivity. Check this by starting afresh each time and attending to the specific quality of what arises in the present. The practice works better like that.

If this form doesn't work for you...

Contemplate how rapture and ease arise in other ways...perhaps when listening to music. Notice what your attitude, attention and awareness are like in that state, and try to bring that around in meditation.

Notice what moves you in a negative or positive way in your daily life. Recollect these matters and incidents, and as you bring them to mind, feel the bodily effect, the change of pace and tone of the thoughts. This change of pace and tone is a change in energy. Putting the topic to one side for a few moments, attend to the energy. Is it bright, fiery, flat, recoiling? Are the bodily effects in your head, throat, heart, belly? Contemplate this way, applying interest and willingness to the effects in terms of energy and body. When you can be open about your sensitivity, attend to a sensitive area and notice how you are breathing. You might even gently stop your breath for a few seconds and then gently release it. Do this several times with any topic and sense the effects in terms of how the emotion moves. Sense how you can witness the emotion with a cool and kindly eye.

Further

Reviewing the mind is important for understanding and integration. Whatever the content of a mental experience, from drab to ecstatic, we can contemplate the process as changeable, or liable to change because experience comes around through qualities of attention and intention and impression – and these themselves are variable. This is the view of insight. If you adapt to that view of the changeability of mental flow, the mind becomes more dispassionate. Being unmoved by what is designed to move us leads to a stopping and peaceful relinquishment of our former appetites, habits and reactions: no need to reach out, no need to recoil. This is integration of the practice.

With the insight into effect and response, we can acknowledge the degree to which our sense of self is bound up in all that: how much we depend upon particular boosts, or register an absence of emotive charge as boring or depressing. We can check the need to feel high or aroused or stable and unaffected. This is just one profile of our apparent self. If we can acknowledge and not keep recreating that; if we can relax from projecting our own moods and views onto others, then the heart can enter a shared and sharing universe. This is wonderful.

Theory: Kamma, self and liberation

And what is kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of kamma? Mindfulness as a factor of Awakening, investigation of qualities... persistence/energy...rapture...tranquillity...concentration...equanimity as a factor of Awakening. [Ang. 4, 238]

In this section we've been looking into the mind as the basis of our emotions – as that in us which feels, gets hurts, complains, aspires and is motivated for good or bad. Much of the practice here has been about acknowledging what's going on at this level, inquiring into it, steadying it and releasing it from hindrances and afflictions. This process often touches into how we sense ourselves in relation to the world and other people. We can feel slighted or welcomed by people's behaviour, useless or in demand with regards to a work or family situation. These 'feelings' carry a meaning that forms who we seem to be – a winner, a no-account, a trusted partner, a loner or whatever. People will commit huge amounts of their resources, and even risk their lives to get to be a winner with that 'top of the world' feeling. And at the other end of the spectrum, there are suicides and the self-destructive behaviour of those who feel they are hopeless.

These inner realities or 'felt meanings' carry an emotional tone, as well as a meaning: they move our hearts and affect how we act. Yet real as it all these feelings seem, they do change; and if I follow them then who I seem to be changes in accordance with them. When I am being 'me, the harassed, overworked' my manner will have a different flavour than when I'm 'me, welcoming you to my home.' Actually, I have quite a few selves, or subsidiary personalities, which take centre stage dependent on the situation, pressures and natural conditions like health. My world view and motivation may change between one of these personae (these selves that we have within us) and the next – sometimes I can hardly believe it when someone reports back to me what I said when I was in a difficult mood. In fact, I might comment that 'I wasn't quite myself then.'

These ranging personae, of which any one can be occupying the 'me' space at a given time, are based on felt meanings that arise around one's role, function, and relationship – as well as on physical health and current attitude. The most residual ones, the ones that really feel like me, are the ones carried in the heart: 'I am the one who has to do all the work (and receives no recognition)'; 'I am the one who can't manage and needs others to make decisions for me...' and so on. They direct us through event after event, and yet we might not even recognize them as such because the mind will imagine that the feeling is being created not from some internal bias, but from the situation that's occurring around us. Or, after a while, as one finds oneself in yet another re-run of the damaging relationship or in charge of the project that failed because we underestimated what was needed, the assumption can grow that this bias is our true self. The potentially crippling reaction can set in that 'I am weak-willed' or 'I'm a complete idiot.'

However, there is a wiser and more useful way of understanding the personal predicament. It touches into the Buddha's teachings on *kamma*, and is supported by the meditations that we've been working with. And it can bring around deep changes for the better.

What is 'kamma'?

'Kamma' means 'action.' More specifically, it means the action that occurs because the mind is bent on that action. Such actions leave results in terms of memories and habits. This result is called '*vipaka*' or 'old kamma.' So we live within a continuum of action and result, cause and effect (*kamma-vipaka*). In this continuum whatever we do while conscious of doing it leaves a result in the mind. These results can occur as the reactions and responses of others, or as effects on our physical well-being, but the deepest result is mental. We acquire a psychological and emotional result that shapes us. After all, this is the way we learn: we do something and from the results – from the feedback that other people or our bodies or our own minds give us – we notice whether that action gave us well-being, or pain. That feedback gets lodged as a memory, a perception or felt meaning. Based on the result, or if we're still unsure, we do the same thing again and so a habit is formed, a

habit that will become one strand in the weave of our identity. That's called 'making kamma,' for good or for ill.

Now it can be the case that the feedback we received from others wasn't accurate – you know, you did something which seemed like a good idea and it wasn't liked at all. Worse still, somebody gave you a hard time, not because of what you did, but because they were having a bad day and you got in the way. This happens a lot. We all get affected by other people's kamma and this is very confusing. You weren't doing anything wrong in your own eyes and someone takes a swing at you. Maybe your mother or your father was drunk at the time. Maybe the kids at school ridiculed your ears or your voice or your clothes or your skin colour because they thought it was fun, or their parents didn't like blacks or Jews or Albanians. So you end up hurt or bitter and frustrated because of what other people do – and that affects how the way you are in the world. The result is you develop a persona based on that memory: a 'self' with a mental bent towards fear, or towards trying to be liked, or towards bitterness and violence.

Another problem is that we don't always learn that well: we get a short-term boost and don't notice the long-term results of, for instance, drinking alcohol. Or we get the happy buzz of buying new things and don't take into account the long-term effects on our bank account. Our instincts aren't always based on wise reflection, so confused assumptions about other people or a lack of clarity as to cause and effect are more common sources of bad kamma than a deliberately harmful intent.

Some people make kamma more predetermined, saying that whatever happens to you is supposed to happen. That is, you get robbed or hit by a truck or on the other hand, win the lottery or become a world-class athlete because of what you've done in a previous life. This can make kamma something fatalistic, something that we have no say over. And if everything is predestined, then there's not much we can really do, no point in doing good or evil and no point in meditating either because that won't change anything. This wasn't the way the Buddha saw it, or how he taught about kamma. Some things that happen to us may be the result of long-term inclinations that span many performances on the stage of incarnation, but many are more immediate: you got hit by a truck because you weren't watching the road. You got sick because that's part of what happens as a result of getting born. Also, what we inherit is too complex to fathom – it's what we do now with it that counts. What we do while conscious of doing it lays down a result. If we were consciously motivated by compassion, or by aversion, or by fear, then those qualities get established in our minds. Even if we act from a conscious choice, without being fully aware of what we're doing or why we're doing it, that establishes the habit of acting without clarity – and our lives get confused. Any and all of these tendencies become part of our personality weave.

The point is that, whatever the reason, the more you follow a mode of behaviour, the more you get established in it, for good or for ill. Every time you act from a perception and mental inclination, the persona that goes with it takes a bigger position in your mind and heart. As you act, so you become. That's kamma, cause and effect.

Two clear messages come through from this teaching: one is to get clear about action and especially to look into the motivations behind it. Whether we are motivated by anxiety, affection, bitterness or just plain unknown random reaction, these give rise to an anxious, affectionate, bitter or confused personality trait. Continue along those lines and that's who you sense yourself as being. Therefore meditate, get to know what's going on under the lid, what makes you tick. Be mindful and allow the immediate impulse to be witnessed, let pass, be questioned, or enhanced. That's the first message.

The second is to know what is good, what you want to live with, what you want to base your life upon. Because any day that life may end, and you don't want to be dying with grudges and anxieties in your heart. If you take the Buddha's word on it, those tendencies that are dominant in your mind when you die will dictate the way another 'you' comes into being in the future. This seems reasonable to me, as it's what happens in this life. But if you don't accept that, still, you'd sooner live and die without anxiety and regret.

The beginning and ending of kamma

For a meditator keen on getting very clear about why they act and seeing what's really going on with all those split-second assumptions of feeling trusted or nervous, the focus is on two strands of mental behaviour. One is perception, the other is the mental activity that arises from that (which I'll come to later). So 'perception' – this is the reflex reference to a sense-object, a reference that is our 'take' on what that thing is. It's funny isn't it, how one person is frightened of the sea, while another sees it as a fun place to bathe: these contradictory mental perceptions are based on the same object. They both have truth in them, but holding on to one perception generates conflict with the other. It's more often the case with perceptions of people. When we meet other people, a lot of value judgements and personal biases are bound to occur – this is someone I can trust, need to win over, can help, better be on guard against, etc. Maybe so – all perceptions have some truth in them, but we need to check things out...can we suspend and reflect on the *habitual* perception, the one that first leaps to mind, before acting on it? Can we seek clarity and act with care? Maybe that impression is pointing to an aspect of another person to bear in mind, or maybe it's telling us something about our own standpoint and bias.

The one who is most subject to our biases is living in our own body, speech and heart: good old me—whatever I have decided I am, will never be, and deserve to be. And of course there's also the 'me' sense that arises dependent on how I'm seen by others. As meditators, we watch and feel these felt meanings and personae. We sense them as transient and in process. We sense them as things that occupy consciousness, but not as belonging to or defining some true and lasting self. If any one of them were really me, then who is the self that's watching them? That reflection offers us the opportunity to respond to perception, to calm it, accept it, or look into it rather than to follow it or repress it.

Thus, we're not obliged to react to the world or the self we seem to be right now. We don't have to blame, deny, speculate, or justify. We don't have to make more habitual kamma out of what's happening. One of the memorable sayings of the Buddha encourages us to live happily and at ease in ourselves, even when we're among people who dislike us. We can sense that their attitude is their kamma and leave it there. Their bias doesn't have to take over our own hearts and minds. And we might feel after a few moments (or hours or years) that we could make some good kamma around such impressions. We could forgive ourselves for our own fear and anger. And once we've seen how reactive and edgy our own minds can get, we could make peace with, be compassionate and generous, even to people who've hurt us. Why not? We're not being asked to approve of others, just to finish with the grudges and start afresh. This is a big step, but it is what is most truly grand and worthy about humans. We can step out of history and we can step forward in a different way. And in ourselves there's the joy: 'Oh, that mean feeling, that twenty-year-old surge of blame or guilt or vengefulness – it's gone.' We've ended a piece of old kamma and the mind feels spacious, settled and agile. So the encouragement is to Awaken to kamma, to end old kamma rather than try to sort out whose fault it is. This is the process of liberation.

Activities

In the course of that inquiry, we can get a useful handle on the strand of mental behaviour called 'activities' – *sankhara*. Activities are the agents of kamma. Activities are everything that causes or is liable to cause, action. What this means is that all those qualities that seem to be 'I' (a cause, as in 'I do, I speak, I feel') are not really a solid being but a repeated activity, a program if you like. And all those moods and states that seem to be 'my self' (as in 'my real self is a tragic romantic', or 'a misunderstood genius') are programs of sorrow, frustration or self-importance waiting to happen. What triggers them off is the perception: 'Life is tragic'; 'no one understands me,' etc. Not that these perceptions don't have some truth in them, but life is also comic, resilient, and the optimal occasion for Awakening. So the perception is a partial truth and the real mistake is the activity. The activity takes a perception as an accurate impression, and then attaches a self to it to carry out the program. The perception is just the trigger that begins the process.

Notice that activities seem to happen 'by themselves' but instead are dependent on triggering impressions and past history rather than personal decisions. These activities are more than just good

and bad, they are the agents of kamma – for good or for ill. Some are directly disagreeable, such as anger, depression or grief. Emotion can be stimulating and lift us up, but it also uses up huge resources of energy. After passion we feel drained. Happy memories or fantasies have a pleasant feel for a while, but they leave the mind in a dreamy, ‘unreal’ state. The psychological or physical energy to maintain pleasant mind-states can only be sustained for so long before we need a break. By and large, these *sankhara* cost us, and we lose presence and sensitivity in the here and now. And yet...they seem to be what life is all about. They form us, push us, drive us into creativity, bond us into events and scenarios...Yes, we can learn from it all, but humans can also remain stuck in the same resentments, the same regrets, the same addictive passions and create a lot of misery.

In meditative training, we contemplate the activity and the results of that activity in terms of good, bad, suffering, well-being, stress or what supports its disbanding. This is where the Buddha’s understanding of activities is really useful. In fact, we don’t have just one activity pattern, we are a whole mass of activities. So no-one is wholly good or bad. Nor can you find any core self that owns or creates these activities. They happen as part of the process of cause and effect.

Still, they need to be understood, because they certainly feel like me, and they can create a lot of turmoil. So the twofold meditative process of calm and insight has to come into play. And with these we can study the activities, especially that one, that clutching, the one that keeps creating a sense of self. What becomes clear as we calm down is that these activities operate through three channels – body, heart and thought. With some practice we can notice how one affects the others and we get some perspective on their very convincing and compulsive programs.

Firstly, there’s the bodily *sankhara*, which gives rise to the sense of where I am. It’s the activity, governed by breathing, of having a vital and grounded body, a sense of being located in a physical context. That means there will be a lot of ‘fight, flight, feed on this’ reflexes ready to fire. Secondly, there’s the *citta-sankhara*, the ‘heart sense’ that presents us with moods, feelings, perceptions and intuitions. This tells us ‘how I am.’ And finally, there’s the ‘what I’m going to do (or should do) about all this’: a bubbling energy of thoughts and attitudes. This is our ‘head sense’, our ability to conceive and articulate, called *vaci-sankhara*, the verbal activity. When these *sankhara* are running, they form our habitual and habituating responses with corresponding thinking, mood and body tone. So, we recognize a task that needs to be done – and our thinking system starts whirring; we see someone we are fond of – and a surge rises up in our hearts; there is a sense of threat or danger – and our bodily sense tenses up. Whether the intention behind them is good or bad, confused or wise, they manifest in a dynamic way and we can witness them in terms of body, heart and thought.

Of the three activities, the heart (or mental activity, *citta-sankhara*) is the most crucial, because this is where conscious action, fresh kamma, originates. Every action originates with a felt meaning that is programmed into the heart, and it evokes a response. That activation may trigger off verbal or physical action, but at any rate every action, even a thought, has an effect on the heart. So *citta* is where kamma is stored, activated, witnessed and guided. If we are clear and balanced, we have some choice in terms of what kamma we create: we can check or act upon an impulse – or we can investigate it, and rub out the blueprint. So the cycle of *kamma-vipaka* can be changed, or stopped altogether through releasing the heart from the grip of activities.

Towards this end, we can generate an activity that balances or allays a confused or violent mental activity, such as bringing up the intention of calm, patience, or kindness. And perhaps most useful of all, when mindfulness of body has developed into concentration, we can steady, relax, and release the heart through sensing and grounding its activity with the bodily *sankhara* of breathing.

Using the body is great because although you may have run out of the capacity to feel much patience and compassion for a boss who’s been surly and demanding for ten years, or with a three-year-old who’s throwing his breakfast at the wall and screaming while you’re trying to get his sister dressed...you can still breathe in and out. And know ‘this is where I am, right now.’ It doesn’t seem to resolve the situation, but it takes you out of the overwhelm of felt meanings and emotions and ‘fix it, do something’ programs to a place where you can gather your resources. From there, you can witness

and not take the whole scene so personally. This kind of thing has happened and will happen to others; this too will pass and you're not obliged to solve the situation or make it work. Know the feeling as a feeling, be with that urge to scream and lash out – as an activity rather than as me and mine. Let it arise and pass. You don't have to be a character in someone else's movie – or even in your own. You don't even have to take on the 'I should be capable, assured, in charge and able to master this' program and persona. And that means that you're in a position to act, or wait with mindfulness and full awareness. You've started freeing up a bit of old kamma.

Awakening and 'not-self'

So freeing oneself from old kamma begins with not letting the old pattern trap you into becoming its stooge. You just feel the activity for what it is. In meditation you can contemplate the activities that move the heart through feeling them in the body – just think of your pet love or hate and feel the flush that happens. And as you feel it, let it move and pass. You'll probably feel yourself becoming charged up, tight or hot or bristling, you may even recognize the mood of the persona who arises with that activity. Do you need to be/want to be that person...again? Well, sometimes that's the way it seems. A lot of the time we either want to become the loved and enriched person that floods our nerve endings, or we feel we have no choice but to be the tight and weighed-down loser that the world seems to make us. We don't have to deny those possibilities, but instead we can choose to contemplate them. Stepping back into your bodily sense, you can feel how that person is going nowhere but round and round. That's what we call *samsara* – happy or unhappy, it goes round and round. Then know that for what it is. When you get the point that there's only a virtual self in that round, an appearance that doesn't arrive at anywhere final and will continue to go round and round, maybe you've had enough. There may be an emotional shift, or a sense of relief. You can let them pass, in peace. Then here you are in your body, feeling grounded, and feeling spacious. You can act with clarity from there.

In this kind of inquiry, if you're really just exploring rather than obsessing and indulging, the only mental kamma that you add is that of mindfulness and investigation. This is the kamma that leads to the end of kamma, in that it doesn't establish a new perception of, 'He is one of those' or 'I am an obsessive person.' Mindfulness and investigation helps us to experience the storehouse of perceptions, impressions and felt meanings as just programs that run through the nervous system. Other factors of Awakening follow on the deeper you penetrate the activities. Applied persistent energy keeps you engaged with the process, and keeps your inner hero alive. Its vigour builds up the power of the mind so that we can stand back from habitual activity. This results in the three factors that provide vitality and firmness – rapture, calm and concentration. When the mind is firm and calm, then there is the factor of equanimity directed towards activities; even the good and useful ones you can know are just that, not something to make into a person. That means you can have a good idea without having to shout it from the rooftops. And you can have a helpful insight, or a state of concentration without getting conceited and obnoxious about it all.

Even these skilful Dhamma activities are not solid three-dimensional realities, they aren't me or mine. Every place where there's a grip around an activity, the basis for creating stress occurs and it feels like 'me.' So there's a deep learning that has to be done that affects our way of being. In a nutshell, the point is to relax the activity that clings to activities...even to the good ones. Because of course, we're not trying to ultimately get rid of activities, and just sit there like a turnip...Just as we need to have perceptions to get some sketch of what things mean, we also have to come up with an activity as a response. The key point is to get free of the clinging, that's what creates the kamma. It should be easy once you know the problem, but kamma has an addictive quality.

Kamma is addictive because we're used to *sankhara* showing and telling us who we are. Even if our self-view is wretched, the hunger to be something is such an ingrained reflex that we operate around it. Just like a junkie ordering his/her life around getting the next fix: it's never going to be enough, it costs us and we should really snap out of it, but it takes some doing. Beyond what we like to be, there is a reflex to be something solid and permanent that kicks in by itself. This is the reflex of 'becoming.' It provides the support for and is the result of grasping. It wants to be something, some self – and whether that is a millionaire who has far more money than they need, or an athlete who runs way faster than they need to, or a depressive who has a much darker view of themselves than is balanced

and true, that instinct pushes us along into self. And becoming is insatiable: it always wants more, a new success, a bigger deal, a darker future. The Buddha said this can go on for lifetimes: he called the process 'further becoming' – which is about as interesting as chewing the same piece of meat for a thousand years. It's only absent-mindedness that really keeps you at it!

The subtle aspect of this from the spiritual seeker's point of view is that it's not possible that 'I can get enlightened.' From the position of a solid 'me' trying to gain something, we can't experience full liberation – because that view of self is an activity. It too is a reflex and an addiction. However, we can come out of the addiction by being filled with the deep potential of the factors of Awakening. These provide the inner stability and richness that means the mind doesn't have to keep leaning on the activities, and identifying with feelings, energies and attitudes for support. So generating these factors is the kamma that leads to the end of kamma. Working mindfulness and investigation into the places where you react day after day is the way to come out of old habits.

Therefore, mindfulness and investigation are crucial. Applied energy and patience are also necessary because some activities have very convincing and compulsive patterns. Righteous me, stuck in an unfair world. Then again there's the inner tyrant who gives us scathing indictments and endless naggings over our laziness, stupidity, weakness and all-round hopelessness. These are important pieces of mental kamma to get free of – and you do so through contemplating the activities with the firmness, bright-heartedness and enthusiasm that comes from non-attachment. Yes, vigour is needed: just sitting there going through the same mental pattern time and time again isn't going to bring release. It can even etch the program deeper. So when you're stuck, stay out of that place, regroup around your skills with breathing or get the assistance of another person's mindful awareness. That's what teachers and spiritual friends are for.

As we acknowledge how stuck all of us get, equanimity arises. This is a very spacious kind of love that neither approves nor disapproves, but offers all the empathic space that we need to allow us to sense our kammic programs without attachment. Then our apparent winning and losing selves can march through without judgement and be seen for what they are. This view offers a life-changing opportunity: when you experience your passions, nagging anxieties and defence strategies as just old kamma, you can step out of them. You don't have to keep offering board and lodging to hungry ghosts that leave the place in a mess. Instead, in the process of releasing old kamma, you live in a fuller, more spacious and assured way – just because you're not carrying so much stuff around.