

Meditation: A Way of Awakening

Ajahn Sucitto

Part One: Establishing the Ground

Part Two: Developing the Mind

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Meditation: A Way of Awakening

Preliminaries

Why Meditate?

If you're reading this guide, maybe you're curious as to why people meditate. Why do they sit still and upright in silence for long periods of time? What are they thinking about? Is it some kind of religion; if so, what do they believe in? Well, it may be that some meditators are deliberately thinking along certain lines; and some may have profound faith in a God or a Truth. But then again, it is possible to meditate without these. To put it simply, what it all boils down to is finding peace of mind – within the mind itself. That the mind is the proper place for that search becomes evident when one acknowledges that, despite many technological, medical and social developments, humanity is profoundly stressed and troubled.

So, what are the roots of violence, selfishness and mistrust? Why, when we have so much in one sense, do we experience alienation and depression? And how do joy and compassion arise? These are some of the vital questions for which meditation may help you to discover personal answers.

What follows are guidelines on meditation that are in accordance with the teachings of the Buddha from some 2,500 years ago. The timeless quality of these teachings is such that they encourage us to look into states of discontent and stress in order to understand and remove the causes. The accomplishment of this is called 'Enlightenment' or 'Awakening.' However with even preliminary steps along the path to Awakening, a meditator can clear out a lot of stuff in the mind that causes anxiety, depression, stress, and limits his or her happiness and personal understanding.

So the answer to 'Why meditate?' is as obvious as 'Why be happy?' It's based on a natural interest in one's welfare. Most of us at some time or another look to get an overview of our lives, or of our mental/emotional states, in order to find either a direction forward, or a stable place within ourselves. Meditation exercises help us to do just this, through the development of steady introspective attention, otherwise known as 'mindfulness and full awareness' (*sati-sampajañña*). 'Mindfulness' is a steady attention to a particular experience, while 'full awareness' is the comprehension that can occur when this attention is steady. Full awareness fully attunes to the specific but changing character of a sensation, feeling, mood or thought. Taken together then, mindfulness and full awareness offer a way of maintaining a direct view of one's inner life a moment at a time. This is Buddhist meditation. It offers us a way to get to know ourselves directly and in depth.

Meditate on what?

Most often, what Buddhist meditation focuses on are the senses and sensations of our bodies and the behaviour and nature of our minds – where we experience suffering or ease. Body and mind: the very basis of what we feel ourselves to be. Yet although we know what the body and the mind can do, most of the time we only have a superficial understanding of their basic nature and how to support their well-being. Because of a lack of awareness, people damage their bodies through, for example, harmful sitting and working postures. And the mind gets swept up in and overwhelmed by sights, sounds, touches, thoughts and moods – especially by its emotions and thoughts.

In the Buddhist sense of the word, 'mind' is not just a thinking organ, rather its central aspect is awareness, a sensitivity that responds to thoughts and emotions. Therefore, this mental awareness 'learns' psychological behaviour such as generosity and trust, or aversion and

wilfulness. As a result, psychological tendencies and mental habits get established which mould our lives for good or for bad. Therefore, in order to establish peace within the mind, it's necessary to understand both the nature of mental awareness – this mind or 'heart' (*citta*) – and the behaviour that it adopts. Awareness receives impressions such as 'friendly' or 'uncertain,' and also feelings of pleasure and pain. Mental behaviour amounts to the reactions and responses, the reaching out or the withdrawal, that arise dependent on what has been received. This behaviour also feeds back to awareness, triggering off further responses. So most of us could be busy all day just processing what our minds are bringing up!

If we establish an overview and understand this mind, certain truths become obvious. If we think in malicious or greedy ways, then we're never content. If we get caught in depression or inflation, suffering for ourselves and others is going to follow. On the other hand, attitudes and considerations in line with honesty, calm or kindness leaves a positive effect. By observing the workings of this principle (called 'kamma' or 'action') we unlock the potential for joy and compassion, as well as clarity and stability. Meditation, as a skill of observation, gives us the overview of the causes that our minds generate, and their effects; as a healing response it enables us to relinquish what harms us, and contact and bring forth what is good and enriching. There is nothing more essential to learn in order to live life well.

To look at this in more detail: there are three areas in our mental behaviour which lead to stress or harmony. Firstly there are **aims** which, if they are confused or short-sighted, lead to harming ourselves or others. Just a small amount of reflection can help us realise that actions whose aims are violent, deceitful or intoxicating are harmful to the sensitive nature of the mind. Acting on these tendencies makes us lose clarity and self-respect and weaken concern and respect for others. Yet people follow these inclinations because they don't reflect on the potential harm of these effects; or because they are not in touch with more supportive values. Meditation gives us a good aim: to be clear and attentive to what we're doing and how we're being affected in a moment-by-moment way.

Secondly, there is the issue of how we react to what we come into **contact** with. Daily life provides many opportunities for being in touch with sights and sounds that leave one feeling tense, distracted, and unbalanced. This can lead to a loss of presence and moral value. Because of this loss, desires and even craving can arise. When people experience a lack of balance in themselves, they often seek out experiences for distraction and stimulation. Another base of contact is coincidental: violence, fear, reckless excitement and greed are themes frequently on display in the public domain, whether one wishes to participate in them or not. Buddhist meditation helps us to focus on appropriate contact. We focus on the sensations in the body or our moods and mind-sets to bring us into the present moment. We begin to understand how we're being affected and how we're responding, and we do so in a way that supports clarity and removes prejudice.

The third factor of imbalance and stress is that of **means**. It may be that we have a wrong grasp of how to do something, or insufficient skill, or be lacking in attention. When any of these are the case, even attempts to be helpful go wrong and lead to misunderstanding. One may not have been fully aware of the specifics of a situation – of the right time, the right place and the character of other people involved. Good intentions can fall short of achievement if one isn't aware and skilful, and so lead to disillusionment and distress.

Meditation encompasses a range of skilful means to clear out misguided aims and unskilful responses.

What these skilful means have in common is that they train us to attend to body and mind with clarity, care and respect. Action based on clarity, care and respect is the most reliable way to relate to any living thing, and training in that has to begin with ourselves. In meditation, we do just this – in a thorough and in-depth way.

Three basic attitudes for meditation

However one focuses on body and mind, three basic attitudes should always be to the fore. These are good-will, empathy, and letting go. The first two attitudes relax any ill-will and harshness and so relax and brighten the tone of the mind. Letting go means getting more free and spacious. It's means simplifying input in terms of quantity, in order to improve the quality of how we receive it and how we respond. Letting go is about gaining ease and clarity – and because of these one consequently doesn't need a whole lot of stuff to lift the heart.

Whether the stress is caused by anger, bereavement, anxiety or a sense of inadequacy, the key to clearing it is through letting go. In meditation, 'letting go' means acknowledging, not just the topic of the stress, but attending to and relaxing the tension, the resistance or the flurrying around it. Otherwise, we simply add other thoughts and sensations to the stress and irritation in an attempt to dismiss or hide it. But by adding more stuff to the mix, we're not actually finding our way out of our mental dilemma. Applying suppression or will-power doesn't help either. So 'letting go' means holding and contemplating a troubled or stressful state in an attentive and empathic way. The very quality of that attention replaces the resistance or the demand that the mind was making; and there is a corresponding sense of release and relief.

The first step in any letting go is 'stepping back' – non-attachment. This initiates letting go by unhooking the mind from the topic that is stirring it up. It's not a matter of avoiding or suppressing the topic, but of seeing it in a clear and spacious way. Non-attachment is about settling back into the present moment, of relaxing into the way things are right now, about letting go of the 'shoulds' and 'shouldn'ts', the past, the future and the imaginary, and meeting things as they arise in the present. But it takes some doing. Letting go needs to be supported by a steady and focused mindfulness and full awareness. These provide the means whereby we can attend to what is happening now without adding more to it or trying to fix it. We learn to feel pleasure or pain as mental events, rather than go into the reactions of irritation or grasping or whatever to such feelings.. In this way, we check the feedback loop between behaviour and awareness, so that the mind finds a calm and steady place in the midst of changing feelings. This is the result of letting go.

Letting go is also about giving things time to shift and settle, and of being patient with oneself. It's about not comparing yourself with others, and letting go of self-images. Letting go makes us more flexible and broad-minded. It is grounded in the understanding that things change; and that they can change for the better if we're attentive, mindful, and put aside distractions and negativity.

As we're working on the basis of our behaviour, meditation also pertains to how we relate to others. An aware reference to one's own body and mind requires and trains attention to be empathic: when one is aware of how one's own wishes and worries happen, one is more likely to have compassion and concern for others. So this affects the ways in which we make contact with our living experience. Then even if we witness acts of violence or events that can give rise to fear or despair, if we have right aim and skilful means then we can contemplate such things with a mind that does not get taken over by panicky or despondent reactions. No matter what the internal or external contact, we can find a balance that leads to the removal of stress, suffering or general dissatisfaction. This is contentment. It's a rare notion – to be content with ourselves. But in this we are present. That's all we can ever be.

Why Not?

I'd always recommend that someone who wishes to develop meditation should seek the advice of like-minded friends and, where possible, an experienced and trusted teacher. Although the overview will help keep the whole picture in mind, the teacher will provide each pupil with more accurate and specific advice in terms of details of the ongoing process. Then

he or she can help one to respond to the ongoing requirements and developments of meditation. However, in the following guide, I've tried to act as a teacher who can respond to the standard difficulties and recommend further developments when they become possible.

For some people there may be reasons why introspective and concentrated meditation is not suitable, or needs to be approached with caution. The first cause for caution is if the chemistry of the brain is out of balance, giving rise to overwhelming emotional or psychological states. If one is using medication to maintain mental balance, it is not advisable to suspend the medication without guidance from one's doctor, therapist or teacher.

Although we may not be able to practise extended meditation in long retreats, the practice of mindfulness and reflection can form the basis for an ethical and attuned life.

On the other hand, physical disabilities are not an insurmountable problem, and many chronically disabled people find enormous benefit and even relief from pain through cultivating the foundations of mindfulness.

So...The first question to ask about developing mindfulness and full awareness is: why not? If you feel it's worth a try, then let's get started.

How to use this guide

What follows is a series of texts; most are just tools, step-by-step instructions. They are grouped in three parts in a way that is approximately progressive (how exactly you progress depends on you). They respectively cover the domains of body, mental behaviour (in other words, mind-states and moods) and mental awareness. In general, the advice would be to take on the practices in that order, although it isn't always essential to be completely proficient in every detail before moving on. It's likely that some readers need one instruction, others need another; and as I've tried to suit a broad range of people, it's likely there's more detail in some of these instructions than any one person needs. Also it could be the case that the sense of kindness and befriending oneself need to be given priority attention early on, or the qualities of deep attention, but I'd always recommend the ground-work of body awareness, as that can always serve as a reliable mooring post for the mind no matter what the mood or approach.

As I don't know you, I'd also add the note 'It all depends.' What use you make of these instructions depends on how your mind works, on what your strengths and needs are. As you experiment with what is offered, you'll get to find these for yourself. Each section simply lays out some instructions, then gives guidance on some of the common difficulties that you may experience in carrying out the instructions. I present the theme, such as mindfulness of walking, and a few techniques. The techniques are variable, but the themes are the basis.

Following on from the initial presentation, come two alternatives: first if this exercise really doesn't work for you (please be patient and take it slowly) then there may be something similar that is more suitable for you at this time. The other possibility (which may be accessible to you within a few weeks, or may take years) is to develop the exercise further. At this juncture I have to say that you'll really benefit, and only really benefit, from working steadily, repeatedly and manageably at an exercise. Begin with ten to fifteen minutes on a daily basis, and work towards getting a full half-hour. In that way you'll find yourself interested in establishing a regular daily practice and building it up from there.

Here and there in this guide are articles which present aspects of the overarching theory, maps if you like, that link these practical instructions into the larger scheme of the Buddha's teachings. These are titled '**Theory.**' Right tools and reference to the map should give you confidence in the direction of the practice. Furthermore, there are sections that look into the '**Process**' of the practice, and these are titled in that way. The process refers to either the

familiar difficulties that one has to pass through, or the more rewarding aspects of the landscape of the mind that one may arrive at and find wisdom and confidence in. Both the positive and the negative aspects of the landscape offer the same calming insight: none of this is yours alone, others have come this way; let whatever arises pass on in peace.

May our journey bring us to the peace of deep understanding!

Ajahn Sucitto

PS For those of you who have interest in the sayings of the Buddha, I've added relevant quotes here at the head of some sections. These are extracted from: Ang – Numerical Discourses; D – Long Discourses; M – Middle Length Discourses; Sam – Connected Discourses.

Tuning in to peace

Meditation can be a very deep inquiry into the mind. It can be undertaken in intensive retreats, wherein subtle features of the way the mind works, and levels of mind that don't get normally get accessed, can come to light. However, meditation is also something that we can practise in a lunch-break or when returning home from work as a skilful means to regain balance and to stay centred in daily life. What follows is an introduction to get us started.

Sit still in a quiet and settled place in a way that feels comfortable. Relax your eyes, but let them stay open or half-open, with a relaxed gaze. Be aware of the sensation of your eyeballs resting in the eye-sockets (rather than focusing on what you can see). Be sensitive to the tendency for the eyes to fidget, and keep relaxing that. Alternatively, you may find it helpful to let your gaze rest, in a relaxed way, on a suitable object, such as a view into the distance.

Then bring your attention to the sensations of your hands, then your jaw and tongue. See if they, too, can take a break from being on guard. Let your tongue rest in the floor of your mouth. Then sweep that relaxing attention from the corners of the eyes and around the head, as if you were unfastening a bandana. Let the scalp feel free.

Let your eyes close. As you relax all around your head and face, bring that quality of attention, slowly, gradually, down over your throat. Loosen up there, as if allowing each out-breath to sound an inaudible drone.

Keeping in touch with these places in your body, be aware of the flow of thoughts and emotions that pass through the mind. Listen to them as if you're listening to flowing water, or the sea. If you find yourself reacting to them, bring your attention to the next out-breath, continuing to relax through the eyes, throat and hands.

If you feel like extending this, sweep that attention down your body to the soles of your feet. In this way, build up a whole sense of the body at ease.

While maintaining awareness of the overall presence of your body, practise stepping back from, or letting go of, any thoughts and emotions that arise. Don't add to them; let them pass. Whenever you do that, notice the sense of spaciousness, however brief, that seems to be there, behind the thoughts and feelings. Attune to the peacefulness of that.

Feel the peaceful quality of that spaciousness, and take it in. Take a few long, slow out-breaths sensing your breath flowing out into the space around you; let the in-breath begin by itself. Sense how the in-breath draws in from the space around you. Attune to the rhythm of that process. You can support this reference to breathing process by asking: 'How is my breathing now?'

It's also useful to think slowly and carefully in ways that calm or gladden the heart. Bring to mind any instances of people's actions that have touched you in a positive way, in terms of kindness, or patience, or understanding. Repeatedly touch the heart with a few specific instances, dwelling on the feeling that it evokes.

Stay with the most deeply-felt recollection for a minute or two, with a sense of curiosity: 'How is this affecting me?' Sense any effect in terms of heart: there may be a quality of uplift, or of calming, or of firmness. You may even detect a shift in your overall body tone. Allow yourself all the time in the world to be here with no particular purpose other than to feel how you are in this way. Dwell upon and expand awareness of any sense of vitality, stillness, comfort or spaciousness.

When it's time to conclude the meditation, keep attuned in a peaceful way. First feel how you are in bodily terms. Then notice what inclinations and attitudes seem natural and important when you are dwelling in your place of value. Then bring those to your daily-life situation by asking: 'What is important to me now?' 'What matters most?' Then give yourself time to let the priorities of action establish themselves in accordance with that.

Difficulties:

If you can't check distracting thoughts, or if you feel bothered by what's going on around you, you may benefit from finding a more conducive setting for meditation – somewhere that gives you a supportive mood. It could be somewhere in nature, a quiet corner of your room, or a meeting place with like-minded friends. Keeping your eyes open will help to keep your mind from getting engrossed in thought.

It's also good to precede a meditation period, which may be of fifteen to twenty minutes, with relaxing and refreshing yourself with bathing and gentle exercise.

Meditation, and being at peace with ourselves, is more fulfilling when we integrate it with how we live. That is, acknowledging the effects of harmful speech, we learn to be more careful. Putting aside drink or drugs, and limiting how much time gets spent working and living at high speed, leads to more balanced energies in body and mind. But because everything we do has its effects, it's also the case that if we have friends who bring warmth and joy into the heart; if we have no regrets and can feel content with how we're living – then the mind is going to feel a lot brighter and steadier.

If this form doesn't help you....

You may find benefit from exercises like hatha yoga, qi gong or kum nye.

Further

To add to the sense of 'tuning in,' use some sound. Begin with breathing out over your larynx open to make sound something between a drone and a sigh. Listen to the sound and to the mood that it invokes. Tune into that, amplifying it and adjusting it with each long out-breath to make a sound that sounds like its coming from an emotive place within you. Don't try to make it beautiful or operatic; the aim is to listen to the mood, not to make much out of the note.

As you do this, let your attention rest for several minutes in the following places: the lower abdomen, the centre of the chest, the throat, and the forehead above and between the eyes. Gradually decrease the intensity and volume of the sound and 'listen' to these places in your body.

Theory: Embodiment

Just as someone who mentally encompasses the great ocean will include in that all the rivers that run into the ocean, so...whoever develops mindfulness directed to the body will include in that all the skilful states that support supreme understanding. [Ang, Ones, 11]

We can sit, stand, walk or even lie down to meditate. Meditation centres on mindfulness, the views and efforts that support it, and the skills and deepening that it allows. Mindfulness is a form of concentration, whereby one's attention is sustained on an object – such as breathing – or in terms of a theme – such as kindness. It's the ability to bear a certain object or theme in mind. In the practice of meditation, mindfulness is trained and strengthened, so that we can bear in mind even moods or energies that are normally underlying and escape our attention. This is valuable, because however far below the surface, it is in the underlying strata of the mind that a lot of our strengths and beauty, as well as negative tendencies, lie. To delve into and clean up this level takes practice and patient effort. For a start, it means determining to put aside other topics for the period of the meditation. Almost certainly, one will remember various things one had to do, or to drift off into speculation or fantasies about the future or the past. This is captivating – but, in terms of meditation at least, a waste of time that could have been used for steadying the mind and deepening understanding.

However, even when we know this, the mind can still slip away at the speed of a thought and without giving a moment's notice. This means that we have to choose something useful to bear in mind – and to put some effort into staying with it – in order to keep to the fore an object or theme that supports clear, empathic, or stabilising states of mind. One of the fundamental ways of bringing the mind into the present moment is to focus on the bodily sense. The bodily sense – the sensations and energies that manifest in the body – is something immediate that we can contemplate. These bodily senses give us ground and balance. They give us the sense of being where we are. Although this may seem basic and obvious, a lot of the time we are not grounded in where we really are, but 'out there' in a world of changing circumstance and reactions to that, without a central reference.

Using mindfulness of the body as a centring reference is a good all-round standard for everyone. It's solid and obvious. And not only does embodiment provide us with a reliable place to be, but it is the source of the facts that govern our life – pleasure and pain, sensitivity and vulnerability, and the rhythms of nature that makes us hungry and tired. The heart is affected and the mind creates its basic strategies in relationship to these rhythms of nature.

The body carries, and can be relieved from, the circumstantial stresses and tension of daily life. If the body feels relaxed and bright, then the mind and heart settle readily; if it's numb, slack or tense, it is difficult to find the energy that is needed for meditation. Conversely, when we find a balanced bodily state and meditate on that, energy is restored to the whole system, and we can feel positive and enriched. If attention can be gathered into this bodily sense, it is withheld from preparing for the variables of the future and the past, juggling duties and inclinations, or gripped with concerns over oneself and others. This withholding allows attention to settle into a more peaceful balance in the present.

Good posture plays a big part in that process, because it gives the mind something to apply itself to and develop skills around. And it also puts the body into a position wherein its energies tend to circulate in a bright and calm way. The 'good' of good posture is not about an outward appearance; it's that which remedies stagnation or tension. However, the balanced alertness of good posture doesn't come around through bodily effort alone. It is a matter of settling the body into balance with a steady and sensitive attitude. The patience and care with which we develop good posture is a development for the mind in its own right: rather than forcing ourselves to sit up straight, we're learning to massage, give, and relax our attention to

attune to a poised alertness.

A moment-by-moment application is needed. And this is done through a 'bringing to mind' (*vitakka*) of the meditation topic. This generally entails a degree of thought or at least of thoughtfulness. Bringing to mind is backed up by 'resonating' (*vicara*) which is the thoughtful listening, sampling and evaluation of what has been brought to mind. *Vitakka* points and *vicara* handles and 'gets the sense' of what is being pointed to. The first is like picking up an apple; the second is admiring it, turning it around and appreciating it. When these are in place, what arises is a quality of awareness that is clear, stable and receptive: mindfulness and full awareness.

The right kind of effort in respect of bearing something in mind is the persistent and calm attention that focuses and keeps returning to the chosen object. With this understanding, we learn to moderate between massive efforts of will, which may have short-term benefits but be unsustainable in the long run, and a gentler and encouraging persistence, which sometimes needs to be fired up to deal with tenacious mental habits.

Upright mind supports upright body and vice versa; the tone is one of balance. This tonality unifies all Buddhist cultivation – which includes ethical standards and compassion, as well as calm and wisdom. All of these take wholesomeness and inner well-being as their keynote and develop it along particular lines. This cultivation shows us that our richest potential arises in accordance with inclinations such as kindness, patience and clear attention. And if we know how to access this potential in our own hearts, then we can act, speak and meditate in ways that bring greater clarity and well-being into our lives. In ourselves we can realise the essence of the Buddha's Awakening.

Sitting

Sit on the floor with the legs crossed, or in a straight-backed or backless chair so that the posture is steady and the spine is upright. Whether you sit in a chair or sit on the floor with legs crossed is less significant than attending to the upright spinal axis. If the spine is stressed by having the shoulders leaning in on it, or the head hunched forward, or the lower back bent out, it is impossible for it to fully support the body. To sit in an upright posture and fully sense the body brings energy into the mind. Good posture is therefore an important basis for meditation.

Aligning Bodily Structure

If you're using a chair, take care to keep the soles of both feet placed flat on the floor; rest the thighs on the seat of the chair and refrain from leaning back. Keep your legs apart to allow the base of the body to rest firmly on the surface of the chair. If you're sitting on the floor, sit cross-legged with one foot resting on top of the opposite thigh with the other foot tucked under its opposite thigh ('half-lotus'); alternatively rest both feet on the opposite thighs ('full lotus'). If your flexibility isn't up to that, never mind. Use any cross-legged position, or even sit on your haunches with your legs going forwards and your calves folded under your thighs. The important thing is to feel steady and be upright in a manageable way. In any case, sit so that the small of the back is slightly concave, with the lower abdomen perpendicular. This should balance your pelvis on two bony structures at its base of the pelvis, called 'sitting bones': you can locate them where the under-thigh of each leg swells into the buttock immediately on either side of the perineum. That's literally 'the bottom line.' So, if you're sitting in one of the 'lotus' postures you may need to use a small firm cushion or pad wedged under your tailbone to support the balance on these sitting bones. With these, you just use the edge of the cushion to check the backwards tilt of the pelvis. Then the weight of the body is transferred down through the broad base of the lower pelvis and the upper thighs.

Draw the lower edges of the shoulder-blades in to counteract the tendency to hunch; then the chest will open and the shoulders relax. At first this will seem like you are pulling a point between the lower tips of the shoulder-blades in towards your chest; then it becomes more like an inclination for that part of the spine to meet the heart; eventually it just feels natural. In this posture the breathing is deep, steady and clearly discernable. This carriage of the chest and shoulders will tend to align the neck with the rest of the spine. The neck is a continuation of the spine: it belongs to the back rather than the head. Counteract the tendency for the head to capture the neck and pull it forward by first relaxing the jaw, and then drawing the head back so that the skull and the neck are in alignment with the back. The chin will tuck in towards the throat. All of this frees the body from the habitual locks that bad posture introduces. Breathe slowly and fully and attune to the effects in terms of the chest and abdomen; these should move when you breathe: the abdomen goes in and out; the chest rises and expands sideways – slightly. If this doesn't happen, the posture is still locked somewhere.

Let the palms of your hands rest on your legs just above the knees or on mid-thigh. Feel out any tension in the arms and hands and steadily drain that down from the shoulders through the arms and legs into the ground. Let the weight of the body descend evenly down through the pelvic region. Taking care not to draw the arms in to close the chest, the hands may turn so that the backs of one set of fingers rests in the palm and fingers of the other hand. Alternatively, you can remain in the previous posture.

'Sweeping' the Body

When the posture is established, it's good to keep sweeping your attention over the body. In this way we can both supervise the posture (it's easy for it to slip out of balance) and deepen overall awareness. You can do this by focusing on the overall sense of the body and then 'tuning in' to any places that feel tight or have drifted out of awareness. At a later stage,

when the posture feels more assured, you can do a more methodical ‘point-at-a-time’ sweep from your head, down and gradually over your entire body. This methodical sweep can take up to an hour, or even more!

Another benefit from ‘body-sweeping’ is that it trains the mind to be attentive, to strengthen mindfulness by bearing details of bodily experience in mind, and to enhance an attitude of gentle, undemanding attention to the body. The tools for mindfulness and gentleness are the mental ‘acts’ of ‘bringing to mind’ (*vitakka*) and ‘resonating’ (*vicara*). ‘Bringing to mind’ is like asking ‘how do I know I have a left hand right now?’ or, ‘where’s my neck?’ Resonating is like asking ‘How does it feel?’ ‘What’s happening there?’ ‘What attitude is occurring towards that part of the body?’ This ‘checking-in’ can reveal attitudes of forcefulness or indifference and replace them with mindfulness and care.

First attend to the overall ‘feel’ of the posture: we can overdo the vigour and underestimate sensitivity. A common error in this respect is to pull the lumbar spine in (pushing the buttocks out) which creates a sense of strength, but over-exerts the lower back muscles. Or, we may try to hold ourselves upright with the shoulders, over-exerting the upper back. Both of these will cause stress. Rather than use one part of the back to hold everything, attend to the whole upright carriage: specifically that the pelvis is balanced on the sitting bones, the sacrum is upright, the spine between the shoulders is concave and the head is balanced on the upright neck. Give yourself the allowance to move a little, wriggling and adjusting the posture to get the body to feel and find its balance. Keep giving attention to the specific points in the body as well as the overall effects in terms of body and mind. Give yourself time to settle.

Head and neck can carry a lot of tension, so in settling into the body our initial aim is to undo this. Tension blocks sensitivity and naturally leads to rigidity and dullness of mind. Loosen the head on the neck by relaxing the jaw and imagining the skull can float upwards. Imagine plenty of space between the chin and the chest so that although the chin is tilted slightly downwards, it doesn't shield the throat. Relax the tongue in the floor of the mouth (even an unconscious pushing up with the back of tongue will send a charge of tension into the occiput). Then relax the tissues around the eyeballs, and keeping the eyes open, soften the gaze – as if, for example, you were looking over the ocean or into the sky. All this should soften the forehead and temples, but bring attention to these points next, and if they feel tight, ‘massage’ them by repeatedly smoothing attention from the centre of each area to its periphery. You could widen and extend the sweep over the whole of the head and even down the body..

Tension around the eyes supports and conditions mental agitation, even if the eyes are closed. So start with keeping your eyes open (facing some quiet space) in order to support alertness, and to relax an agitated or tight gaze. This will help you to find the balance between over-relaxation (and drifting) and over-exertion (and intensity).

Widening and softening the focus will calm down mental activity; narrowing or sharpening will heighten discernment. The ideal is a balance, but a mind that receives the effects of a high-impact lifestyle will probably benefit from softening and widening its attention.

The ‘sweeping’ technique can be used over the whole body to counteract numbness or inadequate receptivity. Draw attention from any place in the body near to the numb place, where sensation is clearly perceived. Reach into the numbness and acknowledge any sensations, energies or moods that may arise. Don't try to obtain a particular sensation – instead allow awareness to uncover more subtly-felt sensations. As you settle into feeling balanced in your body, centre your attention on the rhythmic sensations of in- and out-breathing.

Practise like this for half an hour and when it's time to conclude, do so carefully. First draw your attention back to the spinal axis, feeling that unbroken line from the seat up through the crown of the head. Then widen your attention to include the whole mass of the body structure; resting on awareness of the skin and the tingling edge of the body with the acknowledgement that at that edge at this time everything is spacious and non-intrusive. Appreciate the sense of the space around you, and open into that by listening to what is around you, without engaging with it or thinking about it.

Finally, after a couple of minutes, let your eyelids open and spend a few moments allowing light and visual form to enter your awareness without engaging with them.

Difficulties

1 Physical Pain

The first obvious difficulty may be physical discomfort and pain. Bring mindfulness and full awareness onto the painful part and check any reactions. Is there a tension there or an imbalance that can be adjusted? Can another part of the body be adjusted to relieve that? Sometimes it's a matter of bringing another part of the body into balance: for example brightening the chest and relaxing the shoulders can take pressure off the lower back. Widen the body against the tendency to tighten up. Try moving slightly and slowly to detect where the unpleasant sensation finds an opening for relief. Use the spine as a reference: lengthen and flex it slightly, keeping the rest of the body relaxed. Things may move into a new balance.

Pain felt in the region of the knees is most likely to be a transference of inflexibility in the hips and upper thighs. The long-term remedy is to do stretching exercises around the hip joints. The short-term is to adjust the posture, or prop a cushion under a sore knee. If their pain is not too intense, the tissues in the hips and thighs may stretch of their own accord in time. The pass-mark for bearing with pain is that it should not cause tension to spread through the body, nor lead to rigidity of attitude. Avoid bearing pain in the knees: the knee joint is a comparatively weak structure and meditators can damage their knees by 'sitting through the pain.' Although the mind maybe able to take this kind of treatment, the knee can't. The ligaments get torn and do not repair easily.

You may need to spend some time practising complementary bodywork. This would include exercises to stretch the limbs and strengthen posture. Many people find that a few postures of hatha yoga, or a period of qi gong, are an asset to meditation.

Discomfort that is not damaging to the body can be worked with in a contemplative manner, using the exercise of 'massaging' as mentioned above. If it is a manageable discomfort, contemplate the mental attitude and emotional response to the pain – and 'massage' those. For instance, we can adopt an aggressive impatient approach, or go into a self-pitying moan. Can we acknowledge and undo those energies? Alternatively, we may challenge the discomfort with heroic bravura, or the moral imperative to 'not give in.' But we can go deeper than these rather clichéd attitudes, to arrive at a more serene and responsive awareness of this inevitable aspect of sensory existence. Eventually we can focus on that awareness itself, and the pain may either fade from attention, or become a background.

This is not a matter of getting rid of pain, but of awakening an awareness that does not tighten into aversion. Pain will always find us in the end; we are well-advised to learn from it how to go deeper than our customary reactions.

2. Agitation, Obsession and Drowsiness.

Another normal difficulty is the mind's inability to settle into the body, even when there is no particular physical discomfort. The common experience is of either restless thinking over a wide range, obsessive preoccupation in terms of hankering or irritation, or drowsiness. Sometimes the mind oscillates between all three. One of the prime reasons for this may be an energy imbalance: that is, shifting from work or being busy into sitting still causes the mind to stall. The meditation theme may be too subtle for the mind in its current state to get any traction.

- Open the eyes and attend to the sensations around the eyeballs. Sweep attention around the head as if you are loosening a bandana. Do this clearly, gently and repeatedly.
- Push your tail into the seat or the floor and slightly stretch the spine upwards from the waist. Giving thorough attention to the posture, when you have slowly come to a full stretch, relax and loosen. Practise stretching and loosening for several minutes.
- In a similar fashion contract and open your hands and soles of the feet.
- Control the breathing for a few minutes. That is, take a slow out-breath and when there is no breath in the body, hold that for around 15-20 seconds. (Or the time that it takes for a discernible but manageable pressure to build up in the abdomen). Then draw the breath slowly and steadily in through the nostrils. Allow a few normal breaths and then repeat the exercise, say ten times.
- Practise standing for a few minutes.

All of these practices will facilitate the ability to bring to mind and resonate with certain aspects of bodily experience which are crucial to full circulation and balance of energy.

Instructions for dealing with intrusive thoughts are to be found later in this section under: **'Process: Thinking.'** More instructions on dealing with hindrances such as ill-will, sense-desire, dullness, restlessness and doubt can be found in the guide **'Process: The Hindrances.'**

If this form doesn't help you...

If at times this all sounds like too much...just spending fifteen minutes or so sitting in a quiet place taking in the silence and letting one's thoughts and moods flow through may be a good place to start. Just get used to being present with yourself in a friendly and ordinary way. So use the opening meditation as a basic starter. There may be times when you'll want to develop the practice further with more detailed attention to posture; and it's also the case that posture will tend to develop by itself over a period of months and years if you cultivate a friendly interest in being present with yourself.

Further

1. Breathing

This practice leads naturally into mindfulness of breathing which is discussed more fully later.

2. Aligning Energy

Through correctly aligning the spine and bringing mindful awareness to the entire body, you can release the various blockages in the head, shoulders and abdomen. When you sit for a while in this way you begin to feel a subtle affective flow within the structural alignment; a current of subtle energy that flows between the tailbones and perineum to the crown of the head. As your structure finds its balance, try to attune to these points at either end of the spinal axis. This energy will inform the posture in a self-supportive way. Rather than you having to hold the body up, the body's own correctly aligned structures and subtle energy balance will nourish and maintain the posture.

There is also a current that helps to drain tension and hyperactivity in the head. This flow moves down from the temples, forehead and eyes, down through the neck and throat and the centre of the chest, dropping past the navel into a point a palm's width above the pubis (the place in the lower abdomen where the muscular activity associated with a full exhalation comes to a standstill) to diffuse through the base of the body. It may be easier at first to use the relaxed state of the arms as a pathway for this current, sweeping awareness down from the head through the arms and into the palms.

The overall energetic sense carries a range of currents and sensations (which are quite chaotic at first), but rather than resist sensations or try to find a specific one, keep referring to that sense along these channels. Let energy move around and settle. Settling can be helped by tuning in to the energy that accompanies breathing. This will compose and brighten the affective bodily sense, and in accordance with that, the affective mind and its attention will settle.

Apply your intelligence to investigating the experience of the body, of how changeable it is. Acknowledge and try to distinguish different levels of the experience: the sensations (contact impressions), the feelings (pleasurable, neutral, painful) and the perceptions (the interpretations of the sensations) which build up an inner 'map' of the body. Compare this with the mental idea you have of your body, based on how it looks...is it the same?

To feel fully settled requires an awareness of both an inner core and a space around the body that we feel settled in. So when you have an overall sense of the body, try to discern the innermost 'core' of the body, as distinct from the more peripheral and surface aspects of it. The inner core can be a place of great calm, but it also registers the tension, numbness or aliveness of the body. To work on easing and brightening here will contact processes which have deep significance for one's general state of being.

However, the periphery is also important, as it is here where we carry the effects of shielding ourselves from the outside world. And if this bodily sense is contracted, it's likely that the attention will get drawn into intense or dull states. So practise drawing your awareness slowly in and out from the core to the periphery, from the abdomen and centre of the chest out to the space immediately around you. You can also use the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet as gateways for breath-energy. Attuning to the breath-rhythm in this fully embodied way regulates the energy and enriches the effect of the breathing. This has an overall balancing and healing effect.

Standing Meditation

In this practice we work towards establishing a line of awareness and energy that can run from the soles of the feet up through the legs and spinal axis and crown of the head. Bad postural habits – such as leaning and slouching – cut this line, so that the body feels segmented. With poor posture the upper body leans on top of the lower body and the head occupies a very different realm from the rest of the body – for much of the time it may feel divorced from the torso. The average person may live a lot of the time in her/his head, which is impacted by the powerful input of sensory phenomena and turbo-charged thought processes. So the tension and strain that the head is under can feel normal. And as this part of the body and the functions associated with it are so central, as we get used to stress, it even becomes part of who we are.

The aim of standing meditation is to change all that and get reconnected; to link everything up so that we arrive at a sense of wholeness and balance. The skill of the practice is in standing upright and balanced but not rigid. The effect is of being almost weightless, yet grounded. In this state, with the eyes open, one still feels less impacted by sensory phenomena, the mind is quieter, and one feels more fully ‘here.’

Stand with the legs slightly apart and coming straight down from your hips, and have your feet pointing straight ahead, approximately parallel. Unlock your knees so there is springiness there; let them be slightly bent. Focus on the soles of your feet. Spread your feet over the ground so that as much as possible of the soles of your feet is making contact with the ground. Your feet and toes should feel that they can sink into the ground so that you are like a tree or a plant growing out of the earth, rather than something perched on top of it. Get that idea in your mind and let your body follow that idea: it’s as if your feet are sprouting roots.

With the knees unlocked, the weight of your body will be carried by your feet. Any locking in the knees will cause them to take some of the weight, and cut the flow of energy between your feet and the upper body. So remember to let the knees be loose – then the soles of your feet will be clearly and evenly sensed.

Another place that tends to lock is around the hips, the buttocks and sacrum, because of the habit of leaning. When we lean on a table or a wall, for example, generally the upper part of the body rests on the hips, buttocks and one elbow – which is propped on the surface that it is leaning on. Everything below the waist just hangs, maybe half-supported on one leg. The sacrum and lumbar region are twisted out of true and yet have to take the weight of the upper body, so they have to lock up to provide a rigid base. If this way of standing becomes habitual, the lock becomes chronic, and we lose the ability to stand on our own two feet.

In standing meditation, try to relax everything around the hips, the pelvic region, the buttocks, and the sacrum. The way to bring this about is to ‘drop’ your spine. Imagine your spine extends so that you have a tail which is tucked down between your legs. With this posture, the tailbones are tucked in instead of being slightly arched back and locking the sacrum from below. The sacrum then rests down, and the joint between the last lumbar vertebra and the sacrum opens. In this position the buttocks are relaxed, so the weight descends through the legs.

You may find that when you do that, there's a shift of gravity forward into the lower abdomen. You will feel slightly stronger there. Relax the abdomen so it is not being held. And yet there needs to be a firmness there – not a tightness but a firmness. Relaxing in the perineum also relieves tension in the lower abdomen. The bony mass of the pelvic girdle then acts like a cradle for the soft tissues, and any abdominal tension can release.

Also, unlock the shoulders. It can be helpful to swivel your shoulders around, to swing your arms a bit by means of a gentle movement from the lower abdomen rather than from your head and your shoulders. Swing a little from side to side until the shoulders feel loose. There is no effort in the upper body and the relaxation of the chest and shoulders lets the arms hang free, slightly away from the sides of the body. Without moving anything, let the back relax downwards – as if you were slipping a cloak from your shoulders.

Let the neck be upright and the head free, as in the sitting exercise. Relax the jaw and let the tongue be at rest. Stand with your eyes in an open distant gaze. Let the focus be soft. Be aware of standing supported by the ground and open to the sky above. There is nothing pressing on your back; the forward direction is free and clear. The space around you supports you.

As the body comes into wholeness, attune to the breathing in the abdomen; let its even rhythm check any tendency to tighten up.

This posture feels unusual at first. The thighs have to get used to carrying weight and they will tend to try to lock the knees and send the weight into the pelvis by tightening the buttocks. This tendency can be counteracted by keeping these areas soft and aligning the knees over the centre of each foot. This widens the arch of the legs, sending the weight down the stronger outer edges of the thighs. The shoulders will tend to tighten up to lift the weight; even the neck and jaw want to contribute. Carrying the body through the legs may feel uncomfortable at first, but the wholeness of the body impression and the release of subtle tension make it well worthwhile. Keep focusing on the breathing. In time the legs will strengthen.

Going back to the soles of the feet, those zones of sensation, contemplate the pressure there. Where are the strong points? Where do you feel the most pressure? Is it towards the front, the sides, or the back? Is the body tending to balance more towards the toes, or the heels? Let yourself sway a little until you can feel that pressure zone shift around in your feet. It's probably on one side of your foot. As you contemplate the shifting of the pressure zone, try to make the pressure zone the centre of each foot, immediately around the under-arch of the feet. Focus on the sensations in that under-arch. You will become able to discern a stirring of energy in those under-arches. When you can, acknowledge that point, and get familiar with it. In the course of the practice, those two points become an important focus: when the body stands aligned and balanced directly above those points, the posture will feel effortless and regenerative.

Gradually bring your attention from those points up through the lower legs and the upper legs, and into the central pelvic/abdominal region. Breathe steadily, into the lower abdomen; as you do so, you may sense a tingle flush through the upper body. Extend your awareness of breathing to include all that. Let the breath in, drawing that subtle energy up the upper body. Breathe out relaxing down through the upper body, down to the abdomen, down through the legs, and down into the floor.

Breathe out into the space around you and let your body open into that space.

Breathe in drawing awareness up through the feet, the legs, and the abdomen. Breathe out in the reverse direction. Thus, we have a complete body breath. This is the subtle breath, the energy breath.

If you don't sense this, continue standing anyway, focusing on keeping the body from locking up. Stand for ten minutes or so at first, increasing the time in accordance with your capacities. Agitation and tension will tend to come in waves and bring up corresponding emotions. Use the breath to back up the practice. Every time you breathe through a wave of agitation, the

body becomes more whole and energised, and awareness gains a deeper gravity. Empty the struggle into the body. Empty the body into the space. Eventually you can stand with the strength and flexibility of a tree.

Difficulties

Here drowsiness is not going to be a problem, and it's unlikely that the mind will wander far – these are some of the advantages of standing meditation. Instead, the hindrance that is magnified is agitation and its corresponding tension, which mount quite an assault on the standing posture. But the above exercise is a physical means of releasing these. So allocate a time and stick to it, flexing your knees slightly now and then if you need to.

If you feel strained, resume sitting meditation, or move into walking.

If this form doesn't help you...

Try flexing your knees slowly so that in ten seconds you move up and down about five centimetres. Springing in your knees a little helps to stop the muscles locking. Alternatively, rotate slowly from the hips in a side to side movement in which your abdomen describes an arc through the space in front of it. This movement also turns the shoulder blades in an arc through the space behind them. Moving while staying connected to the space above, behind, in front and below relaxes things and unwinds the attention without a loss of composure. In this way a firm but rested balance can develop.

Further

As you come to the end of this period draw your attention toward the central part of the body, the lower abdomen. That is where you feel the breath beginning and ending. That is the collecting point for energy. Centre yourself there. Sense the space around you from this centre. Sense what it would be like if this area, rather than the head, were the governor of the entire body.

Bring up the intention to sit down. Don't act upon it. Just bring it up into the mind. Relax that thought and notice if your energy has shifted at all. Did you stay in that centre? Or have you gone up to your shoulders?

Bring up that idea again and notice what happens to the pattern of your energy.

Consider sitting down. This time, when you consider sitting down, hold the centre of your energy in your abdomen. Not by tightening anything but by keeping awareness centred there and relaxing any reaching up or contracting in the upper body, shoulders, and head.

When you feel ready, try to stay there and, relaxing the body, take up the sitting position.

Walking Meditation

Walking meditation helps to refresh the body energy and encourage one's awareness to be wide and flexible. If this is developed, one ongoing result is that one knows how to be still in the midst of movement. Although many people may not have access to the kind of secluded level track that is recommended for walking meditation, it is still advisable to cultivate this as best one can in a room, say by circumambulating it in a wide circle. Alternatively, finding a place in a wood, park or beach where one can practise is also good.

Otherwise, by considering the instructions carefully, you may be able to bring aspects of the attitude and the focus when you are just quietly strolling, or even moving along a busy street. As walking is one of the things that a body does, why not use it to develop the skills of awareness?

The skill of this practice is to stay centred while the body is both moving, and aware of its immediate environment. The recommended setup is a straight path of 20-30 paces in a secluded place, along which one paces mindfully to and fro. When you reach the other end of the path, you stand still for a few moments, turn around and repeat the exercise. Walk at a pace which feels conducive: calm, composed, at ease or vigorous. As your mind settles in, you'll get a more accurate feel for what is a suitable pace.

Begin by composing your attention while standing at one end of your chosen path. Bring yourself into the present moment with standing for half a minute or up to a couple of minutes. Stand so you can very clearly feel the soles of your feet spread over the ground and you feel rooted to that particular point. Stand and breathe in and breathe out with an awareness centred in the abdomen as it moves with the breathing. Bring up the intention to walk and notice where the attention moves to in the body, and any accompanying attitude or mind-state. Your centre may move up into the head and shoulders; so draw awareness back to the abdomen and relax the upper body. Do this a few times. The mind-states may express eagerness to get going, or just the opposite; we may be programming the future half an hour before we've really started. If we involve ourselves with that mind-state, it will lead on to distracting thoughts. So let go of that. Stay present being mindful of the body; in other words, sustaining awareness of the senses and sensations that tell you that you have a body.

Let the body govern the posture as you move. Attune to what the body does in order to walk, rather than according to an idea of walking mindfully. That is: the weight shifts to one side, until it is balanced above one foot, say the left foot; this allows the right leg to swing freely, which it does dependent on the pelvis arcing a few degrees to the left. The 'forward' step is powered both by that pelvic swing and by pressing downwards through the left leg. The length of the stride is determined by the extent of the swing and the downwards pressure: the kind of stride we use in meditation generally places the moving foot somewhere between a half and a complete foot's length in front of the stable foot. The sensations in the lead foot punctuate the movement as the pressure flows from heel to toe and is then released. Let it be released; keep the ankle light and flexible. Keeping the mobile leg light and relaxed helps to prevent a strutting or tense walking rhythm. Walk naturally.

What also occurs in walking is that the upper body – the chest and shoulders – tends to swing back a fraction with each forward swing. As the left leg moves forward, the left shoulder moves back a little as a counterbalance. The flexing between the hips and the upper body creates a gentle massage for the abdomen which supports ease and centring. This centring in the pelvic/abdominal region helps your attention to stay centred. If you maintain awareness of the dynamics and the rhythm of walking, a pleasant basis for mindfulness gets established through the 'pressure' and 'release' aspects of how the legs operate, and the flexing of the torso. An easeful rhythm gets going that attracts the mind.

When you walk, you can gather your arms behind you, so that the arms feel long and relaxed, with the backs of the wrists resting on the buttocks and the fingertips of one hand folded over the edge of the other hand. This posture will keep the shoulders open and remind them to let any tension, any holding, drain down the arms. Alternatively, if your shoulders feel tense, let your arms hang freely beside your body, so that their gentle swinging loosens the shoulders.

Walk at a moderate and composed pace. Keep the directives simple: walk to and fro and keep in touch with, or return to, bodily sensation. The mind's tendency may be to either go into thinking, or to get involved with what you can see. In either case, keep returning to the sensations of the body as you walk up and down. The mind will generally elbow in with a lot of comments about related and unrelated topics, so come out of that by sustaining the consideration: 'How do I know I'm walking?' You don't need an answer – it's just a way of getting the mind to return to the body and the present. You can support this more thoroughly by asking how your chest is, or how your shoulders are, attuning to how they are affected by walking. That will feel quite different from how they are affected by thinking.

The eyes readily mirror and affect the mind-state, so it's important to keep the gaze focused but light, letting one's eyes rest on a point in space slightly downwards an arm's length to the fore. If you need a more discernable object, you can focus on the path itself, about three metres ahead of you, but keep the focus soft as if one is gazing out over the sea. Notice how the eyes feel if a particular visual object is grabbing your attention, or if a train of thought takes over, or an attitude intensifies. Attention and energy run out when the eyes keep looking at this and that. On the other hand, a hard stare can bring around an overly wilful state with a loss of receptivity. So attune your attention to the tactile experience of the eyes, of these physical organs being receptive but at rest. Feel the sensations in the tissues around the eyes, and relax there. Then your gaze gets soft, but your attention is attuned. When it does that, your mind relaxes without drifting, and you can refer to the eyes as part of the field of physical sensation.

Recognize the repetitive pattern of sensations that go with walking: sensations in the feet, the hips, and the back. Settle into that. In this way, the steady rhythm of the walking acts as a reference that you can keep returning to in order to come out of compulsive thinking. Remember that you can stop and collect yourself in the standing position at any time that you seem to be losing touch with the feel and ease of the exercise. If you are becoming agitated or distracted, stop, stand still and breathe a few deep breaths. Then begin again.

Attending to the actuality of walking mindfully slows the mind's rhythm: eventually attention will settle into the physical sensations and the mind becomes calmer. As you start to get comfortable, bring ease to the entire body by opening your awareness to receive what bodily sensations come in. Let the energy of the walking flow over and through them. The full establishment of steadiness is when each part of your body 'knows' and is in touch with walking. When your mind settles in that, it won't be thinking, or running out. Then as you attune to how the body feels most comfortable and happy in walking, you will feel a regenerative energy that makes the practice tireless.

This is one immediate benefit of walking meditation.

Finally, as you sense the still centeredness of that energy – it's not a 'doing', 'achieving' kind of energy – you can bring the mind to greater stillness by centring on that. This stillness within movement is both a source for peace and also a valuable reference to counteract any random and agitating effects in one's immediate environment.

Difficulties

The difficulties are likely to be the general agitation that occurs when the mind's preoccupations and wanderings are checked. The resultant agitation will manifest as a restless inability to settle in the body, and an attitude of boredom that keeps questioning the purpose and value of walking meditation. Another difficulty is the tendency to go into automatic. One can be standing at one end of the path with eyes pointing at the path ahead, and then go stomping towards the end of the path without much awareness of the here and now flow of sensations. Things get robotic and the meditation becomes grim.

In either of these cases, you may need to pause, stand still for a few moments, breathing and attuning to the whole body again before resuming the walking.

Other points to watch out for are: take care that the shoulders don't hunch or the head bend over. These deviations out of true will create physical tension in the neck and shoulders and bring up tense mental states.

At times, it may well be the case that the level of occupation with thoughts and moods is such that you can't stay with the bodily impressions for very long. In that case please look into **Process: Thinking, Emotion and non-thinking**. We will also look at other ways of working with the mind in the next main section.

If this form isn't helpful for you ...or as an occasional alternative...

Develop aimless wandering; take a walk through a quiet setting, staying in the present moment and acknowledging each sense-impression – the air on your face, the warmth of the sun, the sight of a tree, the sound of a bird etc. – as it occurs, and let it pass.

Also allow the inner voices and movement of moods to unfold and pass as if they were part of the landscape. Give up on destinations or even on particularly interesting or beautiful things to see. Instead, slow down to be receptive to what each moment brings, in terms of any of the senses or the mind. Don't hold on to any of it: let the next moment happen by itself. Beginning with the moment when you decide to walk: feel which parts of the body come alive with that thought – then relax the thought. Do this a couple of times, then follow the directive to walk. Evaluate how the body feels now, in itself and in relationship to the space immediately around you. Bring up the possibility of walking, and of just following the direction that feels good. Noticing the bodily and emotional effects, follow that direction with a couple of slow steps, staying in touch with any interest or apprehension that arises from any of the sense-bases. Maybe it feels too warm or cool, and so move towards where it feels better; maybe some small detail of what is around you seems to attract your attention. It could be a picture, a cup on a table, or the grain of wood on the door. Recognize that, relax any intensity around that, and move towards what attracts attention, a step at a time, reflectively. If you feel like standing still for a while, do that. Avoid locking into any of the directives, or locking them out. Avoid any written material, TV, radio, etc. Avoid contacting another person. Remember to attune to all the senses, but stay connected to the bodily presence as you move or stand.

Further

1. Cultivate awareness of the space through which the body moves. In general terms, mindfulness of the body should allow the body to be natural – and this entails awareness of the immediate space around the body. The rest state of body-consciousness is about

maintaining balance and receptivity to what the immediate space contains. We lose this when there are too many confusing or threatening experiences in the environment around us: we tend to seal off and dwell in our heads. This experience of disembodiment makes the body clumsy, unbalanced and unsettled. To feel balanced requires sensing a restful space immediately around us.

Awareness of space is not of a particular thing, nor is it merely visual; in the tactile sense it is experienced as an open awareness that we might associate with feeling 'at home.' Walking meditation can help you feel at home wherever you are. So walk towards the space that's in front of you, rather than any particular object. As you move, the space moves with you. It's always there, surrounding you. And then, at a certain point in time you get to the end of your path. You register that, stand, turn around, and come back.

2. You can also refine the particulars of the walking, focusing on one part as you move. The sensations in the feet can easily become a more refined focus for the walking, but first cultivate the right way of receiving sensations, balancing attention and staying embodied. Then if you wish to investigate more closely, attend to the rhythmic change of pressures of the feet. You can link each footstep to breathing, for example: take three paces on the in-breath, then three paces on the out-breath. Or slow it right down with: as you breathe in, raise the foot and as you breathe out, place it on the ground. This pace makes even the span of a moderate room quite adequate for meditation.

Reclining Meditation

It's helpful to know how to cultivate awareness while lying down, so that one goes to sleep mindfully, or can sustain the practice when owing to physical limitations, it's not conducive to sit up in one position for long periods of time. In the following postures, the deliberate composure of the body counteracts sleepiness or loss of focus, whilst also helping to bring around some relaxation.

There are a couple of reclining postures. The 'lion posture' is one of lying on one side on a firm surface with the body stretched out straight and one arm resting along its flank, hand open just below the hip joint. The other arm is folded so that the palm of the hand supports the side of the cheek and the jaw, the fingertips touch the temples and the thumb connects to the base of the skull behind the ear. The ear is between the fingers and the thumb. The head is supported by means of a cushion which should be no thicker than that which will fit in the gap between the head/neck and the floor, without twisting the neck.

Our tendency when lying down is to curl towards a foetal position, which turns down the energy in order to prepare for sleep. So, to counteract dreaminess and loss of focus, the alignment of the body should be straight, and the arm, hand and neck positions carefully maintained. Place the inner edge of one foot directly on top of the corresponding edge of the other foot, so that the joints of the big toes meet. Let one knee rest on top of the other. Positioning the body in this way establishes a line for awareness, and the energy can be maintained at a wakeful level. The energy-points in the under-arch of each foot, and the palms of each hand, act as particular reference points, with one hand being ideally placed to transmit support and warm contact into the head.

Otherwise, and especially if there is tension and pain in the back, it is possible to mix relaxation with wakefulness by lying on the back with the soles of the feet flat on the floor and the legs forming an arch. Try to consciously give the body into the floor: attune to the varying pressures of different zones of the body distinguishing the bone from the flesh, and any places where the muscles feel tight, from the softer tissues.

Does each shoulder-blade fully rest on the floor? Gently wrap your arms around your chest and loop the fingertips behind the shoulder-blades, then roll slowly from side to side, letting the movement open and relax the shoulders by means of a slight pull through the fingers as the shoulder leaves the floor. Get the buttocks to relax and spread by letting the arch of the legs swing from one side to the other. Ideally, the sacrum and the lumbar vertebrae will rest on the floor. These movements will help the back to relax.

Pull your chin towards the throat so that the neck lengthens and rests on the ground; then relax the chin without losing the neck alignment: this will help to rest the neck muscles.

Then let awareness establish a line down the centre from the crown on the head to the sacrum. Sense the tail, and connect that sense to the sensations and energies in the soles of the feet, centring on the under-arch. As you establish that line of reference, add a line across the shoulders; this enables you to monitor the plane of the upper back.

Place the hands together palms down, so that the fingertips connect to a point just below the navel and the thumbs touch a point just above it. Alternatively, form this finger-thumb circle around the sternum (breastbone). In this position the energy of the palms and the sensitivity of the fingers connect directly to the open front of the body – a calming, intimate touch. This calming will make it easy to feel the breathing as it rhythmically swells and relaxes the abdomen or chest. Let the palms fall towards the spine with each exhalation and then come steadily swelling up with each slow inhalation.

You can also counteract the sleep habit by sweeping attention in systematic loops from the upper body down one leg, and back up the other leg into the upper body again.

Difficulties

Falling asleep is the obvious one; getting lost in thought is the other. These can be counteracted by deliberately thinking of one part of your body at a time – beginning with a foot for example – and sending all your attention there. After a minute or two, let go of that part, relax it completely, and move up to the next part.

Because it allows energy to settle, this practice can also help to resolve insomnia. If one remains awake, one does so in a calm and restful way. And when the system finds that balance, if it needs sleep, one will go to sleep.

Mindfulness of Breathing: Body

Mindfulness of in- and out-breathing is the most detailed and progressive meditation instruction given by the Buddha, affirmed by him as being a practice that leads to full Awakening. It covers the ways in which breathing affects and moderates the bodily energies, mental (emotional and psychological) energies, and mental awareness. And his teachings of the practice also indicate how to get clear of attachment to any of these.

But to begin...If we're going to place attention on the breathing, we'd better be clear as to what 'breathing' is as an experience. So how do we know we're breathing? Breathing in and out can be sensed through the movement of the muscles and other soft tissues of the abdomen, as well as the widening and lifting of the chest. Breathing can also be sensed through the sensations that the inhalation and exhalation of air makes with the nostrils and throat. Then again, whether we're focused on it or not, we soon get to know about breathing through the presence of, or limitations to, our available energy. Breathing's a pretty crucial process for staying alive! Then if you focus on the experience of energy, it's obvious that the inhalation is different from the exhalation: breathing in brightens and arouses bodily energy; breathing out softens and diffuses bodily energy. The body senses the difference; it has to – life pivots around getting input of fresh energy and clearing out stale residues via the breath. To put it briefly, breathing dictates whether the body will live, how much it can do, and how it senses itself – as bright or relaxed, replete or exhausted.

How the body senses itself is called the 'somatic' sense. What the somatic sense senses is the presence of and changes in bodily energy, bodily vitality if you like. Moreover, the Buddha referred to this energy ('*kaya-sankhara*,' or 'bodily formation') as a key to the practice of mindfulness of breathing. It is significant for meditators because this energy relates to both the body and the mind. That is, when we feel tense, there is an emotional/psychological feel to that, and a bodily, somatic, one. When we feel happy, or at ease, depressed or sleepy, that state has mental and somatic effects. A meditator can use this relatedness to their advantage, because having access to the somatic effect allows the possibility of witnessing and steadying the mind through sensing the somatic effect and steadying it. This is very much the case with mindfulness of breathing, because the energy that accompanies breathing is the centre and moderator of somatic energy. Therefore, just as the breathing may become choked, stale or irregular with difficult mind-states, a steady and easeful breath-energy will steady and even release those mind-states. It is through moderating this somatic energy that mindfulness of breathing leads to states of well-being and composure.

It's also the case that the awareness that registers the somatic effect is not an idea or an abstract kind of knowing. It is as direct and natural as knowing whether you are standing upright or leaning over. So when one 'knows' the breathing in this way, the activity of thought can quieten down and cease altogether – yet still there is the knowing. This kind of knowing doesn't operate in the same way as our customary thought processes: it's not agitated, has no aims, opinions or judgements. Some people call it the 'silent witness.' Still it gives feedback: we can notice when it disappears under a wave of dullness or agitation and reactions; and we can sense it in terms of somatic effect. That is, as the 'knowing' gets established, the body's energies relax and become clearer. Distracted or abstract thinking on the other hand create tension and flurries in the body.

The Buddha's instructions repeat over and over that one should discern in-breathing and out-breathing – a rhythmic process. Yet there is no record that he ever specified where in the body one should place one's attention (or that one should even focus on the breath). The instruction is to be aware of breathing in and breathing out. And as he regarded this repeating process as more significant than a place in the anatomy, then our focus must be on the discernable rhythm that the breathing goes through. So as we settle into the practice, the first step is to be

able to stay with the unforced rhythm and be calmed and steadied by that. Then if we access and dwell in the consequent pleasant somatic effect, the mind is cleared of hindrances and brightens. Eventually, when through bringing to mind and resonating the mind aligns and settles into the body's breathing, two bright states (of rapture and ease) arise to form a steady, pleasant base for awareness. This is the first level of concentration, called first 'absorption' (*jhana*).

Give yourself time to set up, and then settle into a sitting posture that you can sustain comfortably for half an hour or more. Sit with the idea that the tailbones can extend down into the ground and take root. Relax your shoulders and draw energy down your back by the simple process of repeatedly and steadily sweeping attention down your spine, through the pelvis and into the ground. As you are doing this, let the front of your body feel free and open; let each inhalation lift through your abdomen and chest. Don't pull your chest or force the breath. Instead lift gently through the spine, as if you are hanging upside down, lengthening your waist, and letting your neck be long. Tuck in the spine between the lower edge of the shoulder blades as if it were connected to the breast bone.

How do you know you're breathing? Feel the fullness of the breathing when the upper body is open: how the diaphragm moves steadily, how the chest rises and falls with the breathing, and how the overall effect is vitalising. This effect is due to the energy of unhindered breathing. Stay with that, in an appreciative way.

Focus on the steady flow of inhalations and exhalations, and let your attention move around, familiarising itself with how the body is affected by breathing. You may find it helpful to deliberately extend each out-breath and in-breath a little for five or six breaths, so that the sensations associated with the endings of the breath are made stronger, and the pause between the breaths is clearly discerned. Do this in a gradual and relaxed way. Make the practice one of fully ventilating the system ... give it time to clear out any staleness; let your out-breath drop down through the belly like a deep sigh; let your in-breath open your body into the space around you. Let the breathing find its own rhythm and extension, it may be quite irregular at first. Notice how the breathing affects the mind and heart; and as moods and mental energies come up, how they affect the breathing. Be spacious, and ventilate body and mind.

When things settle down into a more regular pattern, your attention may centre on a particular point in your body – the back of the nasal passages, the throat, chest or diaphragm for example. Rather than force the mind to one point, let it settle where it feels most comfortable; or if it seems to settle in an overall awareness of the upper body, let it do that. Wait for the settling. You can help this by waiting for the breath. That is, at the end of the out-breath, just wait for the in-breath to begin of its own accord. This should take a few seconds. Similarly, wait at the end of each inhalation.

If the body begins breathing in (or out) without a pause, the system is not yet relaxed and settled. You may benefit from a more relaxed and trusting attitude; or from moving your attention around your body, checking in with its steady structure and the open, non-intrusive space around you. Then work towards relaxing the chest completely, so that the muscles of the abdomen operate the breathing. You may need to deliberately and gently swell out your abdomen for an in-breath until the system gets used to abdominal breathing.

When you notice that your attention has drifted (or leapt) off, wait in the acknowledgement of that for a moment. Don't react; just give the mind a moment to fully note the feel of that drift or spin, and the feel of the clear acknowledgement. Then as you feel clarity return, ask: 'Where is my breathing right now?' Wait for the next exhalation, and as it comes, breathe out

the agitated or constricted energy of the hindrance. Let it go. Then wait for the next inhalation and be with that.

The mind will get agitated from time to time, but make the practice one of relating to the busy or wandering mind with sympathy. Rather than control the mind, or follow or speculate over its moods, keep patiently returning to the breathing with: 'How is the breathing right now?' Wait for it, meet it, and relax with the out-breath. If you feel sleepy or low in energy, wait for the in-breath and meet that. Let the breathing moderate the mind.

As you get more settled, attend to what happens regularly with each breath. Firstly, notice the rhythmic sensations of the physical form – most obviously the swelling and subsiding in the abdomen and diaphragm. Secondly, be aware of sensations associated with the air striking the respiratory tract in the nose or throat. Thirdly, note the regular shift of energy through the alteration in your body's general tone – brightening and sharpening with each inhalation, relaxing and diffusing with each exhalation. Let your mind feel the rhythm of all these; attune to the sense of 'being breathed.'

If you find yourself settling in this rhythm, attend to the play and interaction of all aspects of the breathing process. Notice and give attention to the overall effects on your mind – whether you feel clear or sleepy, present or distant, relaxed or nervous for example. Then notice and feel out the effects on the entire body, and how you sense your body. Most likely, your sense of your body will include physical sensations and also the tingles and flushes of its somatic energies. You may even discern gentle tingling effects in places that seem removed from the breathing process, such as the palms of the hands, the flesh around the eyes, and the temples.

As you settle into relaxing the chest and centring in the abdomen, see how much breath your body needs. Try taking a little less breath on the inhalation, and slowing it down. Do so without force, but with the suggestion 'Why don't I just relax a little more? How much do I really need right now?' Imagine the breath to be like a fine strand of silk passing through the body, and keep relaxing into the calm. The changes that you experience may give rise to a sense of getting somewhere – relax that sense and just be with the breathing a moment at a time.

If the breathing does calm and become centred, its energy will feel bright and steady. The material aspects of the breathing – the sensation of the air, and the movement of the diaphragm may fade out, leaving just a bright somatic energy. Let this breath-energy flow through and suffuse your entire bodily sense. Imagine the whole field of the body with its nerves like capillaries quietly flushing with breath. Focus on the mixture of mental brightness and subtle bodily sensation, letting go of any wavering or flurries that may occur. Enjoy.

Notice how the experience of body has changed. How is it now?

When it's time to come out of the meditation, do so in a graduated and centred way. First of all connect to the physical aspects of breathing, the air flow and the subtle movements of the body. Then take some time to feel into the bony structures of the body, with the softer tissues wrapped around them. Connect to the ground by focusing on the upright spinal axis. Notice how the experience of body has changed.

After a minute or so, open up to the space you're sitting in by listening to the sounds and the silence around you, then as you feel ready, slowly opening your eyes and letting light and external form enter your awareness. Even now, don't jump out into seeing – rather, let forms introduce themselves to your awareness until you feel ready to meet and address them.

Difficulties

1. If you find it difficult to stay with feeling your body, try using various forms of thought to give you a bodily focus. For example silently intone a number, in sequence from one to ten at the ending of each exhalation; and then do the same in reverse, returning to one again. If you forget which number you're on, return to one and continue as before. Alternatively, silently intone 'Bud-' on each in-breath and '-dho' on each out-breath. This may work even better if your eyes are slightly open.

You can also try imagining what the breath feels like. What would it look like? This may help to open up greater receptivity in the mind.

2. In any prolonged period of meditation there is often the difficulty of discomfort and pain. The advice is a simple rule of thumb: with what is bearable and manageable, keep massaging around and through the sensation with awareness, as outlined before. The possibility that this breath-meditation offers is to relax the somatic energy so that it doesn't contract around unpleasant feeling. It is this somatic contraction, as if the body is trying to pull away from the unpleasant sensation, that triggers emotional and psychological suffering. If there is no contraction, there is unpleasant feeling, but no suffering.

As the practice develops (over months or years), a lot of physical discomfort will be eradicated by suffusing the body with rapture and ease.

Some discomfort is caused by trying too hard. Tension arises if we support the idea, even unconsciously, of getting somewhere or attaining some state. The mind also gets tense if we have approached the breathing with an attitude of 'concentrating on the breath.' This may sound counterintuitive: surely we're supposed to be concentrating on the breath. But the Buddha's approach is one of sensing and knowing the breathing. And as we do that, and get comfortable with that, the mind settles down. As it gets really settled and happy (which does take time), it comes to one-pointedness in that comfort. This is what's meant by 'right concentration.'

The emphasis has therefore to be on repeatedly connecting the mind to the breathing by bringing the breathing to mind and evaluating/resonating with it. One aspect of the one-pointedness is that of attitude: to just be with the breathing, sampling it and sensing it

3. Unsteadiness of energy can be remedied by adjusting the breath-energy. This is particularly for cases where the energy drops too radically with the out-breath (and causes a drop in attention) or rises too vigorously with the in-breath (and causes overintensity). If you contemplate the energy that accompanies the respiration, you'll notice that it normally descends on the out-breath, and ascends on the in-breath. The imbalances can be remedied by reversing the energy pattern. You can adjust the breathing itself by slowing and refining the breath as described above. Also you can develop attention and perception in particular ways. That is, on breathing out, establish the perception of speaking out loud, or of chanting or singing. This sends energy upwards through the chest. With the in-breath, establish the perception of drinking the air in, right down through the pit of the stomach. If you can, imagine it descending down through the body to the tailbones, with the body opening up as it takes in the air. As an added touch, try this while standing up.

If this form doesn't help you...

Use the exercises on the four postures (sitting, standing, walking and reclining) to develop the mind. Breathing is always happening, but maybe there are other things that are more

accessible to your mental state at this time. Also have a look at the instructions ‘**Sublime States**’ and ‘**Deep Attention**’ for a change of focus.

Further

In this exercise, changes in the mental landscape may become apparent. There may be an increasing degree of calm and composure, which is accompanied by stepping back from physical sensations and relaxing into the somatic energy. This brings around an inner brightness and pleasure, called ‘rapture’ (*piti*) and ‘ease’ (*sukha*). With this inner brightening, the mind begins to feel like it is participating in, rather than merely observing, the process. It feels held in, or floating in the breath-energy, and there is a sense of buoyancy. Mental activity, especially thinking, quietens down. However you may also feel some unsteadiness. The unsteadiness, like the uplift, has an emotive resonance; the uplift is joyful, the unsteadiness is a mixture of excitement and nervousness. It may unsettle the attention and cause it move or drift away from the breath into associated imagery or moods. Accordingly, tune in to the energy itself, rather than the emotion or mood: if it feels too highly charged, widen your span of awareness and soften your focus. If the energy is wavering, attend to its relaxing aspect, rather than its heightening aspect.

It may be the case that a subtle impression, like light or warmth, appears in the mind. Steadily receiving this impression (rather than seizing it or glaring into it) is also supportive to settling the energy. Eventually the mind will experience more ease than rapture.

In subsequent exercises, we’ll look at how mindfulness of breathing can moderate mental/emotional energy.

Process: Thinking, Emotion and Non-Thinking

...with the abandoning of unwholesome thoughts, one's awareness becomes steadied internally, quietened, unified and concentrated. This monk is then called a master of the courses of thought. One will think whatever thought one wants to think and not think any thought one doesn't want to think...one has made an end of suffering and stress. [M.20.8]

We suffer a lot through our thoughts; more commonly so in the West nowadays than through physical problems. And in meditation we start to recognize that any physical pains that we do have can be made much worse by the attitude with which we hold them. Much the same goes for pain from a mental, perceptual source. Thinking forms a significant part of the way physical pain is held; it is charged with emotional drives that give rise to that 'trapped, desperate, this shouldn't be happening' mood. Then there are the pleasant sensations or mental states accompanied by 'more of this, this is the way it should be' and the neutral accompanied by 'well, shouldn't something be happening?' Although these moods do the holding, they in turn are backed up and incited by the thinking process. 'I was feeling OK until I started thinking about the rotten deal I got, or what someone else is getting, or the way it was, or the way it should be....'

Even when thinking is conducive to pleasant moods, it contains the drawbacks of restlessness and loss of receptivity. If the mind is overstimulated it stirs up too much energy, and also diminishes the appreciation of the here and now. Thinking too much, we go racing ahead of where we're at. With a head full of good ideas, we can get clumsy, impatient and insensitive, and so preoccupied that we don't attend to the present moment or the person next to us. Perhaps even more fundamental than that is the loss of connection to our own bodily presence when thinking gets overstimulated. This can lead to any of the many unnecessary accidents that beset our lives.

And yet thinking is an important part of our lives and cultivation. So the Buddha taught two levels of mind cultivation: the first is to replace unwholesome, pointless thinking with skilful thoughts and use the resonating faculty to understand the effect of the thought. Subsequent to that one learns how to put all thinking aside in order to still and unify awareness. In the first case, we learn to take a moment at a time, acknowledge it with a very simple thought, and back that thought up with the more receptive resonating faculty. For example: breathing in with the thought 'Bud-' and out with the thought '-dho.' Then evaluate: what is the feeling of this? What effect does it have? In the wider context, how we think affects how we speak (and the converse), so we learn to contemplate: 'How is my speaking affecting others? What attitudes is it highlighting in myself?' In all of this, the Buddha's instruction simply is to acknowledge and lay aside the unskilful, and pick up and sustain the skilful. The struggle to do just that is what the following exercises are intended to address.

The second level of mind-cultivation deals with stilling the action of bringing a topic or object to mind. The following exercises also suggest ways of capturing the energy of thought and gathering that into the still alertness of concentration, to the degree of absorption (*jhana*). With reference to this cultivation it's instructive to note that even skilful thinking occludes deeper receptivity and access to the territory which we might call 'the unconscious.' Thinking taxes the energy that is shared with the body. In Buddha-Dhamma, mind, body and emotion are connected, and it is by gathering them together that we enter 'concentration' (*samadhi*).

The connection between thinking and emotion is perhaps more apparent; even academics get impassioned when talking about their pet theories, and Buddhist meditators certainly get fired up about their insights. If the emotion is wholesome and is encompassed by awareness, fine;

it's when the emotion is denied that problems arise, even around wholesome or neutral thoughts. We deny that such and such is 'just an opinion,' or that we have any partiality towards a particular view. However with the more powerful emotions, we've all noticed the bodily effects: the tightening and heat associated with anger, the stomach churning of worry and anxiety, the paralysing and numbing effect of shock, and the brightening effects of love and joy. A keen attention can discern the somatic and emotive effects that accompany any thought. When we can discern and moderate these we can either think skilfully, or stop thinking.

In this we begin to handle the thought-energy (*vaci-sankhara*) – which is such a powerful factor in our lives. Investigating its emotive energy (*citta-sankhara*) helps us to see through apparent 'objective rationality' to the undisclosed attitudes and biases that engender suffering. If we can master thought, it can be used for specific clarity and discernment, rather than second-hand generalisations.

Hence one of the aims of the meditation exercise below is to touch into the emotion underneath the thought, reveal and allay or balance the emotion. Emotions tend to convince us with a smokescreen of rationality, or capture us by their power. Also, even if we are keen to allay an unsupportive mood, we can't always change our mood by reasoning or aspiration; and in that stuck state we can add more emotional and conceptual material to the mix with a depressed or guilty mood. However, in meditation we develop the skill to relate to the somatic effects of an emotion, rather than add more emotions or thoughts to it. Whereas our emotional sense can add conviction and vitality to an angry or righteous stream of thought, it is impossible to maintain such thinking with a calm and open somatic state. Hence the great advantage of tackling the emotional state by referring to the somatic state: the body is not convinced by justifications, and has no opinion about our emotional balance. It just knows, 'this feels stressful, better to let go of that', 'this is uplifting, it's good to follow that.' There is development in terms of calm and insight.

Of course many emotional states are affirmative, and all that is needed is to find balance within them so that we can manifest them in a sustainable way. We may, for example, find ourselves unable to handle or express our affirmative moods; or on the other hand overwhelm or dominate others with a positive but insensitive energy. Then again it's easy to overlook more far-reaching or ethical issues through being charged up over one aspect of a competitive sport, performance or social gathering. Or we develop an indiscriminating infatuation with a person, rather than a more rounded-out appreciation. However, if we can contemplate the emotional texture of thought – how inspiration or joy affect us – then there is the possibility of sustaining and steadying that effect. This leads to the skill – which is referred to in the next tetrad on mindfulness of breathing – of steadying a positive affect to the degree where thinking can cease. Deep concentration and well-being can be realized through the stilling of all thought, and the abiding in uplifting states. And with that comes the recognition that happiness is an energy within us, rather than something that has to be catalysed by events and people around us. So we don't have to need (and miss out on) good times. An accomplished meditator can use their appreciative and enjoyment faculties to support and bless others, or to abide pleasantly in the here and now.

The cultivation of perceptions, thoughts and emotions is a large part of all Buddhist meditation, and of life in general. In this we can always benefit from checking and penetrating the energy of thought, and below are a series of exercises, or tips, to help with this. These don't form one exercise, but offer particular ways of getting a handle on the thinking that can occur while attending any meditation theme.

Initially, just keep cutting off the stream of thought by acknowledging it and returning to the meditation theme. Determine to put the topic aside and consider the value of so doing. Contemplate the state that the mind is in when caught in even the most entertaining thought. Is this going anywhere? Is this a good use of this occasion?

After returning frequently to the theme in this way, and finding that the mind is not settling, contemplate the flow of thought, the topics that come up...is there one that seems to be most prominent? Some may be secondary: thinking about the thinking, or compensatory: thinking that takes one away from the primary concern, or arising due to the disturbed energy of the mind. Ask: what is of concern here?

Consider the thought in the following way:

- How does the topic of thought affect my life?
- What areas of concern does it touch into?
- What would it be like if this thought were not here?
- Can I determine and resolve to follow that line of thought? If not, why keep it going? If so, what stops me from acting on it?
- Considering all these, is there a particular action or process that I feel moved to undertake?

Then determine to follow that action, or process, step at a time, in way that now seems appropriate.

If this doesn't serve to quieten and unify attention, listen to the thought-stream, ask it to repeat itself or provide more detail. Note the change in rhythm, tone of inner 'voice' and how certain images or phrases stick out in terms of intensity. Note also any pauses, drops or rises in levels of intensity. Bring up the intention to put the topic itself to one side for a while, and ask what the primary feeling is. There may be a few, so ask which is the dominant one. Don't be in a hurry. Repeat until you feel certain. Note how that mental perception and feeling affects the bodily sense: whether you lose your sense of body; or feel tight or hot or unsteady. Above all, whether the specific emotion is one that pushes out or one that sinks you down, notice the general 'stuck' mood that comes with an unresolved thought-process. Without losing reference to the specific mood, deal with the overall 'stuckness' that makes it seem so much what you are.

Ask what the overall 'stuckness' needs: space, firm ground, empathy, release...what would that feel like? Rather than trying to get rid of the mood, bring that sense of interested empathy to it. What aspects of practice evoke that sense? Is there need for kindness, or letting-go? Is there a respected person who embodies that? Bring those perceptions to the mood. Turn that theme over and over in the mind, contemplating the moods, perceptions and energies that come up. Back this up by reflecting on the 'stuck' perception that the distracting thought brings up, no matter how justifiable or interesting its topic. Note whatever accompanies the shift to letting go and incorporate that into your theme.

If there is a freeing up of the 'stuckness,' how does the original topic now seem? Can you allow it to settle by itself? If it's unresolved, is there room to live with it? What would allow that room? Consider: what immediate shift in awareness creates that space, and how does it feel? Or, if there's something – a need, a grudge, an attitude – preventing that shift, is there room to be with what prevents that shift? And what creates that space? Without dismissing the topic, review it from that space. Does this present a fresh insight into the attitude that underpins and holds the thinking process?

In responding to the stuckness with interested empathy rather than rigid attitude, we may suddenly realise a fresh approach to the topic of thought or the mood that it brings up. It may

have been a matter of finding the right space, rather than holding it all tightly.

If the thinking process continues to run on as before, or you couldn't bring the previous process into fruition, try going to the overall sense of the body and relax that, breathing in and out steadily. Don't concern yourself with changing the thought, but of settling the awareness to more fully receive the effects of the thought. Keep focusing on areas of the body that seem disturbed, held or contracted, relaxing them, opening them up to the thought and its perceptions and feeling. Transfer the thought-energy into the embodied awareness, mixing and mingling the two as you sit, stand, or walk.

Attuning to the rhythm and energy of the thinking, ask if it's possible to slow it down a fraction in order to meet that energy more completely. Keep slowing it until the thoughts are at 'walking pace' and the spaces between them are discernable. Contemplate the arising of each thought out of the space, and assist in the formation and moulding of each thought. Help it along, like supervising a toddler trying to walk. As each thought begins to subside, help it to its rest like helping an elderly person into their seat. Feel what it's like when the thought has rested. Be willing to help the next one to its feet.

Try combining this with 'aimless wandering.' That is, think of standing up, feel which parts of the body come alive with that thought – then relax the thought and remain seated. Do this a couple of times, then follow the thought by standing up mindfully. Evaluate how the body feels now, in itself and in relationship to the space immediately around you. Listen, and let your open eyes attune. Bring up the possibility of walking, and of just following the direction that feels good. Noticing the bodily and emotional effects, follow that direction with a couple of slow steps, staying in touch with any interest or apprehension that arises from any of the sense-bases. Maybe it feels too warm or cool, and so move towards where it feels better; maybe some small detail of what is around you, a picture, an array of stuff on a table, an image on a shrine seems to attract your attention. Recognize that, relax any intensity around that, and move towards what attracts attention, a step at a time, reflectively. If you feel like standing still for a while, do that. Avoid locking into any of the attractions or impulses, or locking them out. Avoid any written material, TV, radio etc. Avoid contacting another person unless they have given specific consent. Remember to attune to all the senses, but stay connected to the bodily presence as you move or stand.

After an appropriate period of time, return to the sitting position, even if it's only for a few minutes.

In these ways we use the power of extending awareness over the thinking-consciousness so that its activity is gradually calmed. In the 'aimless wandering' we extend awareness through all the sense-bases, again while slowing down the activity of the mind so that the arising of attention and intention can be recognized and calmed. Breaking the rhythm of the thought-process in this way checks its emotional surge, without creating an emotional surge or thought-process to oppose it.

Alternatively, with thoughts that one rather treasures and tends to indulge in, bring up some inquiry. Break into the stream with the question: 'Who is thinking?' The stream will break momentarily, and then flow again, perhaps in response to your question. Ask the question again and again, to the main topic or any responses to the question itself, breaking the rhythm of the thought-flow until you can apply that question to the beginning of the thought. Contemplate that area where the thought emerges. What is the energy and perception there? Who or what is that?

The final resort – perhaps to be used in an instance where one is about to act – is to suppress the thinking process with a bodily action, such as pressing the tongue against the roof of the mouth, holding the breath or clenching the fists. We might resort to such measures when we ‘bite our tongue’ to check an unskilful comment or a giggle.

Difficulties

The primary difficulties arise from being entranced by the thinking, so that the wish that the thinking stop does not rally enough mindfulness, energy and know-how to bring that wish to fruition. To simply suppress the thinking or to deliberately think its opposite (replacing a thought of malice with one of loving-kindness, or of sexual desire with one of the unattractive aspects of the body) is a straightforward strategy, but the mind may soon lose interest and enthusiasm in carrying it out. The crucial point here is whether the spiritual faculties are strong enough to come out from the mesmerising effect of an obsessive thought. The heart responds to, and even hungers for, heightening and intensifying effects, and the intensifying effect of a hindrance, especially sense-desire, has a magnetic pull that may be too strong for one’s limited stock of willpower, mindfulness and faith. Worries seem to be urgent and responsible responses. Similarly, when one’s mind is obsessed by a grudge, the practice of loving-kindness may come across as dismissing or glossing over a legitimate complaint.

If none of these forms help you....

Try writing down the thoughts, on the condition that you will not preserve their written form. As the thought-process unfolds and you write it down choicelessly and without editing, stay in touch with the moods that flow through the mind. When you choose to end, consider why. Read what you have written with open-minded interest, as if it’s written by somebody else. Who do you think wrote that? How does that person feel? Can you experience some kindness, compassion or interest in that person’s well-being? Consider the stream of thoughts in that way. When you have finished, respectfully incinerate the paper.

Alternatively, talk your concerns out with a skilled listener.

Further

In any of these, contemplate the space that is there at the ending of a thought. What is the perception of that space – large, bright, cool, warm, attentive, silent? What is the mood of that space – serene, friendly, awesome, concerned? If it lingers for a few seconds or more, contemplate how it relates to your body: for example, is your body inside it, or is it inside your body? But slowly...add these considerations only as is suitable to supporting the space, and its silence. Let the sense of space or silence be the ground for mindfulness of whatever mood arises. Holding to that ground will allow the mood and thought to pass. Whose is the mood? Whose is the silence?

With the thought-stream as one reference, and the absence of thought as the other, and with an ability to at least step back from the proliferation of topics within mental awareness, we get in touch with more subliminal and residual emotions. These manifest as a familiar pattern of feeling that seems to be very much what ‘I am.’ This level of the emotional bias which is felt as ‘my self’ is the focus for the ongoing liberation of the heart – which means not trapping that apparent self in any view or attitude. Allow it to be what it is and change as it will.

So keep a sustained awareness of that feeling, that sense of who you are, without trying to change it in any way or even understand it. Learn to maintain an empathic and steady presence and attune to any changes, shifts of feeling or energy that occur. Just allow the relationship between your watchfulness and your felt sense of self to mature. And of course, be on guard against any analysis!

Process: Hindrances

When one knows that these five hindrances are cleared, gladness arises...from gladness comes delight, from delight in the mind, the body is calm, with a calm body one feels joy, and with joy, the mind is concentrated. [D 2, 75]

The ‘hindrances’ (*nivarana*) are mental states that act as obstacles to concentration, clarity and deepening. These are generally listed under five headings: sense-desire (*kamacchanda*) to which may be appended covetousness (*abhijja*); ill-will (*vyapada*); sloth-torpor (*thina-middha*); restlessness and worry (*uddhacca-kukkucca*); and wavering and doubt (*vicikiccha*).

The hindrances arise as topics – the mind picks up a thought or an image of something to long for or find fault with – and also as energies. That is, there may be agitation (too much energy, not enough centredness); or a stale energy, as in the case of ‘sloth-torpor.’ At times the energy may feel fixated, as when there is obsession and the mind is wrongly centred in ill-will or craving. Sometimes hindrances arise in mixed forms such as boredom, a state which can be a mix of low levels of ill-will, craving for sense contact, and the lack of initiative that characterises the dull mind-state known as ‘sloth-torpor.’

In their mixed and diluted forms hindrances may not be apparent, and may hide behind either attitudes or views. An attitude such as ‘I’m not in the mood for this today’ may be a cover for ill-will or sloth. A view such as ‘I’m not the kind of person who needs to develop awareness’ may again be a mix of hindrances. The world in general bristles with views and attitudes that justify killing as well as other kinds of conduct that lead to conflict and suffering. And these views persist through human history. Therefore one of the founding principles of the Buddha-Dhamma is to investigate the mind; that is, to investigate both the causes and consequences of actions, and the present moment mind-state. This is the process of reflection and ‘deep attention.’ Furthermore, in meditation we are encouraged to investigate the ‘feel’ of any mind-state: is it agreeable, does it feel settled; is it the kind of state that you’d like to continue? Or is it rough, or blurred?

This is a good way to pick out the hindrances: they have a constrictive feel to them. They hinder the brightness, agility and ease of the mind. They create pressure or weigh down on awareness making it fixated or dull. When you investigate beneath the plausible rationale or the glittering attractiveness of a mind-state, you can touch into the feel of the energy of that state. Skilful states, such as compassion or patience, may not be promising you anything; they don’t have a lot of dazzle to them. But beneath the surface they feel strong, clear and bright. Righteousness, on the other hand, can be very convincing, but it feels fixated and harsh and closes the mind down. Sexual desire can have a compelling lustre to it, but beneath the surface of its promises and fantasies it feels hungry and driven. To investigate such phenomena in terms of causes and consequences and in terms of present-moment ‘feel’ leads to great insight. Looking into the underpinnings of what drives, repels and shuts us down shows us how much of this is just assumption and habit. And when we free ourselves from these, there’s a whole new world of potential.

The hindrances are never dispelled by acting on them. So one of the aims of meditation is to clear them, even when they’re just latent tendencies that will flare up sooner or later. To clear them, you have to encounter them – so when you notice a hindrance, that isn’t a disaster, but on par for the course. Nevertheless, until you know how to encounter and clear these hindrances, the mind will always be subject to their contractions, stress and biases.

Understanding that makes the meditation keen and important, a sense of ardour (*atapi*) gets aroused. This quality is a necessary concomitant to Buddhist meditation. It means being keen,

alert and 'on the ball.' Moreover the experience of how the mind's awareness feels when it is unhindered (the Buddha likened it to coming out of jail, or recovering from a terrible sickness) ripens that ardour into a mature source of purpose and wisdom.

Even when these hindrances come up, just through tackling them they teach us detachment: they, like our more fortunate states, are events rather than personal possessions.

Below are offered some fronts from which to encounter and clear the hindrances.

Address attention and attitude:

A first step on encountering a hindrance is to check the attention: am I attending to a theme that is useful? To be addressing sources of conflict in one's life is useful, but only in so far as it doesn't bed the mind down in ill-will towards others or oneself. Similarly, there's a time when planning is advisable, but if it serves to overwhelm the mind in restlessness, then stronger mindfulness is necessary. So when there are 'hot' topics, topics that carry a lot of charge for us, we need to establish a basis in wise reflection. That is, one considers, in the case of conflict: 'Conflict is a common part of human experience, not just a personal failing in myself or others. When it occurs, I need to consider what is most important to our well-being – to accept that people see things differently, and to aim to explore our views without creating hurt and harm.' Or: 'Uncertainty about the future is a natural state, because the future is the unknown. Rather than try to predict it, or worry about it, the wisest course may be to steady and uplift the mind in the present. Then whatever happens, I'll be in the optimal state to handle it.' Reflection like this is called 'deep attention' (*yoniso manasikara*) because while not ignoring the topic, it looks more deeply into causes and consequences around the dynamic within which the topic is held. There may be issues of who has power, of winning and losing self-esteem. We may be berating ourselves because we aren't living up to the ideal that we'd like to be. We may be lacking in confidence in our capacities. These issues need to be acknowledged so that they don't add another layer of concern to the topic at hand. But in all of this, deal with one issue at a time, finding out which is the most important one first. Maybe it's just that we don't want to deal with conflict! Similarly with craving and ambition: find the time to ask what is really important to you. Could that be found in the present moment by developing a friendlier attitude towards yourself? Skilful inquiry, supported by of mindfulness, and the overriding attitudes of good-will, empathy and letting go can bring around resolution both with others and within ourselves. (See '**Deep Attention**' for further guidance on this topic).

Sometimes, the wandering mind is just restless and needs simply checking. So as you recognize that it's drifting, pause, ask 'Where is my breathing/body/meditation topic right now?' and let the mind realign its awareness to the theme of meditation. With this, be careful not to add any judgements, impatience or agitation – these will only provide food for further hindrances.

In general, the basic attitude that works best in meditation is to let go of how things should be, and address how things appear to be. Addressing what arises through an attention based on good-will, empathy and letting go helps to lead the mind from a good position, and that in itself can ease the mind out of a hindrance. When we really find value in good-will and letting go, then there's much less room for hindrances to breed. Regard the mind is a treasure to be guarded, valued and polished: with this attitude one gets to live with the most reliable source of well-being.

Address topics

Sometimes the mind isn't really interested in the meditation theme, and so it wanders off in all directions. The Buddha recommended that in the same way that a king's cook watches what food his/her master likes best and then serves them that food, so different themes, or

techniques within a theme, work better for different people. The skill is to find what works for you in terms of bringing around an available base for mindfulness.

For example, you may find it better to focus on your spine when sitting, or on the rhythm of breathing, or on the overall sense of the body; or you may find that directing good-will towards your body helps; or a detailed visualisation of the parts...and so on.

Another alternative is one of not having any topic! That is to sustain the overall attitude of good-will, non-forcefulness and letting go, and let the mind wander. Then, wherever the mind's awareness goes, allow that; wherever it rests or lingers, be light with that and let it pass. Just keep loosening and releasing the mind's tendency to hold on to a thought or a sensation and make more of it.

When a hindrance has a very strong grip however, it's not always easy to stay light and let go. Then one may directly address the topic in a way that counters it. This is called '*patikula*' – 'countering the affliction.'

- **Sensual Desire**

In this respect, when the mind is obsessed with sexual desire, or fascination over one's own or another person's body, the recommended medicine is to bring to mind and consider the unattractive aspects of the body. Firstly, that the body's nature is to age and degenerate, and it only looks really attractive through preparation, dressing up, grooming and styling. So one considers the wrinkling and various blemishes that affect the skin, the sagging of the shape of the body, or even what it looks like when one is ill.

Further, one can bring to mind what the body is like under the skin: fluids and membranes and organs that don't arouse sexual interest, and may even arouse disgust. Playing with the perception of the body in this way helps us to see that desire and fascination isn't really about the body; it's more the case that there's an energy and a view in the mind that projects itself onto the body and dresses it up as something that it really can't be.

In terms of inanimate objects, 'covetousness' – that is hankering after clothes, cars, furnishings, gadgets and so on – the standard countering reflection is to consider how attractive such things will appear in five or ten years' time. Or to consider them as they deteriorate, break down, or become old-fashioned.

- **Ill-will**

Ill-will takes various forms, but the overall sense is one of contraction. There may be a sense of recoiling with disgust or aversion; or the opposite, a bristling with aggression; or there may be a state of mind that is unresponsive, lacking in empathy or good-will. Admittedly, it's not sensible to dwell in dangerous situations or be with untrustworthy people, but the withdrawal from those can be through the positive senses of clarity and discernment rather than with a negative attitude. Whenever one feels the absence of willingness to be here or to be with an experience, based on blind reflex, this is ill-will.

It's surprising, but statistically true, that the greatest percentage of ill-will that we experience is towards ourselves – or, more accurately towards certain perceptions/impressions that we have about ourselves and our behaviour. This is why there is a continual emphasis on establishing good-will and empathy towards oneself as well as towards others, as an overriding attitude. Meditators in general include the practice of loving-kindness/non-aversion (*metta*) as a meditation theme to return to as a practice in its own right. In brief, this entails checking the blaming, cynical, mean-hearted, or demanding attitude by stopping the flow of the accompanying patterns of thought. After temporarily arresting the line of negative thought, you can then look both at the relief that respite offers, and look for a source of good-will. This

may mean acknowledging a good deed, or at least a sincere endeavour of some kind. It may mean recalling an incident in which you felt loved, appreciated or valued. Connecting to that impression and the mood that accompanies it, you then mindfully bear that in mind to allow the mind to fully take in the feeling of non-aversion, non-contraction, or good-will. It's not a matter of painting everything in rainbow colours, but of acknowledging the damaging effects of ill-will, arresting the flow of thoughts of ill-will, and turning the mind to an impression that encourages it to soften and widen into the health of good-will.

Compassion (*karuna*) for other people when they are trapped in deluded or abusive behaviour is another way of turning the mind away from blaming and holding grudges. Behaviour is not a person! The way we act is according to inherited programs that we learn or get conditioned into. And although we can cause harm to others, unskilful behaviour is a disease that infects and afflicts our own hearts.

Furthermore, the practice of glad appreciation (*mudita*) of others' good fortune, success, or talent combats jealousy and indifference. And finally there is equanimity (*upekkha*). This is the ability to be present and spacious with any emotional state or personal characteristic – up, down, stuck rigid, or wobbling. Equanimity becomes more readily available as we get to fully understand that mental behaviour is changeable, not an identity, and prone to flaws. Then one doesn't feel frustrated, impatient or disappointed by the actions of others. Please see the sections on '**Kindness**' and '**The Sublime States**' for detailed instructions on these themes.

Aversion can also be towards inanimate things rather than humans and other creatures – such as towards the flavour of unfamiliar food, or the stain on a carpet. The recommendation here is to regard such things as just what they are, not going in accordance with one's own preferences. Also things, like excrement, that may fill us with disgust should be regarded as made up of elemental matter. It's salutary to consider that a morsel of tastefully prepared and garnished food changes from being source of delight to one of disgust within seconds of it being eaten! Which is the true state? Actually, these are just elements and changing impressions.

- **Sloth-torpor**

This manifests as the inability to have a clear focus, or an available source of energy, or a firm attention. The mind is dreamy, resistant to applying any effort, which feels uncomfortable. However, the state of sloth-torpor isn't comfortable either, and there is an urge to go unconscious, or fall asleep. Here the problem is that the mind doesn't sustain any topic; the remedy then is to provide simple ones that don't require a refined focus. Open your eyes to lessen the effect of the dull drifting state. Focus around the eyes and the temples, asking 'What is felt here?' Keep the attention active. Check the posture and sweep up the spine, giving energy to supporting a downward push through the tail and the inward curve of the lower back. Straighten out any hunching over in the upper back and neck. Keep attending to the body, slowly and clearly connecting to each part and bringing it to mind. Beware of just reciting the name of the body part that you're attending to, without bringing to mind an aspect of the sensation or energy that is felt there. If it seems that you're not feeling anything, note that – how is that? How do you know you have a body? How do you know you're here?

- **Restlessness**

Restlessness is a prime contender for any available slot in the thinking mind, where it manifests as worry. Worry has an anxious feel to, and is characterised by its inability to arrive at resolution coupled with the compulsion to keep the topic of concern in the spotlight of attention. As far as topics go, it's good to shift the mind from worrying over details by considering mortality, and also that value and enjoyment are to be found in the present moment. A restless mind is not far from inquiry. The hindrance can be transformed by investigation, so investigate the state to discern the bodily and emotional tones that

accompany it. This will turn attention out of the obsession with an unresolvable topic to a place where there is rest: in the simple groundedness of the bones as we sit, stand, walk or recline with mindfulness.

- **Doubt, wavering**

This hindrance flourishes when we expect certainty from the thinking mind. So the overall strategy is to change the mode through which we operate and find definition. For this the inclination has to be towards direct awareness rather than abstract thought.

For example, the topics that arouse doubt may be about one's worth – but this has to be experienced not as a matter of opinion but through directly acknowledging specific qualities, skilful and unskilful, in the present moment. And what we can know directly is that love or irritation, sadness or joy, form a changing mixture of qualities, and are not a fixed personal possession. All that really rests with us is the awareness of that changeable flux. Of this there is no doubt.

Also, when you have a balanced look into the qualities of mind, that very looking in inclines towards the skilful and feels disturbed by the unskilful. So you also get the sense of your moral intuition, something that your personality may not recognize it has. As long as we don't recognize our basic goodness, then the mind is uncertain and seeks affirmation through opinions.

Other topical basis for uncertainty is uncertainty about the future, one's own or that of others. But the future is always unknowable – because it isn't here yet. And one can't be what one should or could be and what one is right now at the same time. All that we can directly be aware of is how it is. This may mean that either aspiration or despond is present, but the path is to directly feel out the qualities of those. As we do this, these states tend to transmute into joy, in the case of aspiration, or equanimity in the case of anxiety or despond.

Doubt, or uncertainty, is in many ways a crucial hindrance. It can be the end result of all the others, forming a gulf in our self-confidence or our ability to have access to the Dhamma. It can mount into depression. However, on the other hand, when it is handled skilfully, it can show us the ephemeral nature of what we reach out to, at the same time as revealing an awareness that doesn't reach forward or back. In this instance it is transmuted from a hindrance that stirs up agitation and gloom, into one of the three signs of release – inconstancy. One of the primary 'signs' of Dhamma – inconstancy or change (*anicca*) – is also that of the uncertainty of the sensory and conceptual world systems that we feel bound to. Then it is a 'sign' of insight-wisdom. With this there is release from chasing after certainty in that which is transitory and ephemeral. And also we shift our reliance from thoughts and moods to that of direct mindful awareness. Direct awareness can acknowledge change and uncertainty and stand on its own ground. It is something that is always there, you can depend on it. Uncertainty can then support faith: we can be here with the changeable.

Address Energies

Addressing the energy of a hindrance takes some skill and practice, because the energy I'm referring to is not an area that we are normally familiar with. 'Energy' in this instance is not an applied effort, but the involuntary somatic 'charge,' like an electric current, that accompanies mental-states. It can be sensed (quite easily with powerful emotions like rage or fear) around the eyes and mouth, in the solar plexus, across the top of the chest, or in the palms of the hands. This somatic energy is the bodily aspect of the energy of the heart, the emotional energy. So when one gets affected, the other does too, and these energies can either bind mental awareness into hindering states, or support the deepening ease of right concentration. Therefore the skill here is to deal with the bodily aspect in a simple mindful way, by spreading a calm and unconstricted awareness over the whole body, bearing the

hindrance-energy in mind – rather like smoothing the creases out of a sheet. This ‘smoothing’ of awareness will smooth out and level the energy, and the mind will come out of the hindrance.

Because hindrances may not always be apparent at first, it’s good to check in with the overall state of somatic energy. First of all, get in touch with the sense and sensations of the body and spread awareness over the entirety with the overall attitude of good-will, empathy and letting go. Establish and monitor the upright axis. Then the practice is simply to keep bringing attention to a discernable restriction or agitation in the energy in parts of the body, steadying attention to receive its changing quality. Explore it, wonder over it: what is it like? This is what resonating is about. It brings a kind of evaluation that has no judgement.

You can then sweep the entire body, a little at a time, and then as a whole, checking for tension or numbness. Massage the body with mental awareness. Mindfulness of breathing is particularly useful because that flow of energy tends to snag or be uneven around unbalanced body energy. It is also the prime means for spreading healthy energy through the body. Breathe through the tightness or the fluttering – *with no attempt to change, release or understand anything*. Put the attitudes aside, and attend with good-will, empathy and letting go.

With sloth-torpor and restlessness, the need to address the energy in the body and mind is quite obvious.

So when there is restlessness – a tense state in which one feels endlessly busy – how does that express itself in terms of body sensation and energy? What is happening in the chest, back of the head, legs and hands? In this way, restlessness turns into investigative energy needed for insight-wisdom. And the dull low-energy state of sloth-torpor? What helps is not fighting it or trying to generate more energy, but adapting the focus and the pace of the meditation to something that is more compatible. Fighting and struggling just uses more of the limited supply of energy and one gets frustrated and irritable. Drawing attention to the sensations around the eyes, in the neck, the temples, without trying to feel brighter brings around a balance. And in this way, we draw the energy of the hindrances back into the domain of mindfulness of body. Here it adapts, or transmutes, into an equanimous stillness.

With thoughts that depend on and stimulate sense-desire – there is a minor gratification, but the insatiable and restless nature of fantasy is frustrating. And the energy of reaching out is disorienting: we lose where we are. What can help is to acknowledge what the energy is reaching out from: maybe loss, boredom, loneliness....Try keeping the awareness steadily reaching in to the hungry place. Work with suffusing the entire body with the energy that accompanies breathing. Sense-desire is a frustrated wish for comfort. It can turn into warmth and ease if tackled rightly.

Ill-will prevents one’s attention from noticing the place, and the moment where its process begins. Its apparently aggressive energy wants to defend awareness from feeling pain. So don’t fight ill-will! It needs to be understood. Explore the tone of the energy and, breathing into it, relax its agitation. Let the awareness be spacious, and in any pause that occurs, listen in. Be content to do just that; find the right distance, one that doesn’t create pressure. Notice the particular and specific epicentre of the ill-will, rather than the diffusive generalisations. Gather a steady and empathic awareness at a trustable distance around that epicentre. When it isn’t going out into topics, the energy of ill-will adapts to be a source of precise discriminative discernment.

Sometimes doubt and wavering are a chronic habit of not firming up into the present moment. Giving specific attention to the body circumvents the flux of opinions. So get familiar with that, and ask the mind to wait in unknowing...to replace conceptual certainty with a

receptivity that uses the steadiness of embodiment for support.

Applying attention to the energies that carry the hindrances is a very thorough process that brings around their transmutation. When you address these energies, really attend to the energy you directly experience, and not the notion of what is causing it. Thus: 'fast moving, agitated, flushing' rather than 'angry,' or: 'stiff constriction' rather than 'fear' or 'control.' This way of practice is aimed at unfolding the tangled energy of the hindrance (rather than the idea of cutting the hindrance out of the mind); therefore, what counts is that the energy of the awareness with which you approach the hindrance is itself open, easeful and empathic. Any judgemental attitudes, however justified they are in rational terms, will add their energies to the current mind-state; and they are less helpful and healing than the direct non-judgemental energy of open steady awareness. Truly, with this mode of relating to our own blocks, shadows and lost places, we can learn about the power of awareness. It's a whole domain of the mind that can get sidelined. But in meditation, it's the main focus for development. And right here in the experience of the hindrances, we can realise the power of awareness to heal and make whole. Then the energies that were hindered become a balanced resource.

Theory: Meditation and the Path to Awakening

I have seen an ancient path, an ancient road traversed by the rightly enlightened ones of former times. And what is this ancient path, that ancient road? It is this Noble Eightfold Path, that is: right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Along that I have gone, and going along it I have fully come to know decay-and-death, I have fully come to know the arising of decay-and-death, I have fully come to know the ceasing of decay-and-death, I have fully come to know the way going to the ceasing of decay-and-death. [Sam 12, 65]

What is Awakening?

The short-term aim of meditation is to bring calm and stability to the mind/heart, and through that provide a basis for insight into the issues that govern our lives. Such fundamental life-topics as pain and pleasure, wanting and resisting, identity and relationship – are all food for insight when we have the skills to contemplate and handle them wisely. This long-term process is summarised in the Buddha's **Eightfold Path** – which comprises overall perspective, aims, moral development and meditation. It is both a comprehensive way out of causing conflict and pain for each individual and a way to bring the fruits of cultivation into the world in which we live. To fully comprehend and integrate this Path is called 'Awakening.'

Any path has to have a sense of direction or purpose: a going from and a going to. The Buddha did teach an end to the Path – called 'Nibbana', or sometimes 'the Deathless.' At which point the notion of Path ceases to be useful, because Nibbana is the end of coming and going. This experience is impossible to define in words, except to say the Path doesn't create it, but reveals this freedom as our fullest potential. More often than talking about Nibbana, the Buddha focused on what are called the **Four Noble Truths** as the understanding that leads there. These Truths are: that in our lives there is suffering and stress (*dukkha*), which can range from dissatisfaction to anguish; that it has an origination; that through abandoning the origination there can be a stopping of suffering and stress; and that there is a Path that leads to that stopping. In this formulation, the sense of Path, a sense of direction or purpose fits well.

These Four Noble Truths have to be worked on; they aren't always apparent. A lot of the time we don't abandon the origin of suffering and stress, but rather shift the topic that is triggering it. Just as we scratch an itch, or fidget in a chair rather than let go of irritability, we commonly turn the mind away from its edginess and onto a source of pleasure. Alternatively we may react to getting hurt or frustrated by losing our temper, blaming someone or getting depressed. This reactivity isn't always something we have much say over: lose someone you're fond of and it's likely that you'll feel down for quite a while. We all respond in that way, but these responses don't get to the roots of the problem, which is the reactivity in our hearts. Cultivation of the Path, in its eight aspects, is the Buddha's remedy for clearing the heart from both these afflictive strategies and the underlying Unknowing from which they originate. It is through this Unknowing that we want what we can't keep, fight with the way things are, and ignore the full fruition which our systems are capable of.

The process of Awakening entails holding the potential for liberation in mind and strengthening the Path in terms of outer action and meditation. It also means waking up to and dismantling the source of suffering in terms of how our inner mental action. Some heart/mind responses are impaired with what are called defilements (*kilesa*); so called because they defile the brightness which we are capable of. Defilements occur as specific incidents: jealousy over someone else's success; hankering after a particular food; irritation over delay, etc. So instead of experiencing empathy, contentment or patience, we suffer instead. However through

reflection and training we can realign ourselves to see that other people's happiness doesn't do us any harm, so why not feel some gladness on their behalf. This means we tune in to empathy: I feel good when I can wish others well, feel compassion for them and so on. On another count, rather than get irritated and angry over what life is doing to us, we can turn it around by reflecting some warmth to ourselves and just weathering through. After all, when you're getting a rough deal, why make it worse by burning up inside over it? Furthermore, we can learn to let go of the neediness that keeps us running after the bait of material things. With some work on the mind, you get to know your own value and you don't need all that stuff. It cuts out a lot of stress.

When we cultivate like this, we begin to appreciate the clearer, more easeful and agile mind that is revealed. So as a result of adjusting our behaviour and attitude, we get to know our innate balance and well-being. That's the way the Path works: suffering and the way out; problems are a spur to cultivation. This ability to lessen the confusion and turmoil in our lives gives us the confidence and skill to develop meditation.

Meditation also reveals ingrained flaws of the heart called hindrances (*nivarana*); so called because they hinder the enjoyment of a pure mental awareness. These are listed as covetousness (*abhijsa*) or sense-desire (*kama-chanda*); ill will; dullness and lethargy (*thina-middha*); worry and agitation (*uddhaca-kukuccha*) and doubt (*vicikiccha*). The last of these is not doubt over an external fact, (what is the capital of Mauretania anyway?), but the doubt about one's presence and value. It amounts to loss of confidence, despair and depression. The first goal of meditation is to free the mind from the effect of these hindrances, even temporarily. Even more than with the freedom from defilements, the mind gets to feel really good, and that makes the work of tackling the hindrances well worthwhile. The hindrances go down in proportion to the arising and strengthening of spiritual qualities that eradicate them, and the overall effect is to make one's mental awareness steady, agile, penetrative and peaceful.

Until these factors are present, most of us wouldn't recognize that there are subtler and more deep-rooted biases in the mind. These are so ingrained that we take them for granted, but they also support suffering. Take for example the notion that there's something that we should be, or have that isn't here right now. Conditions change, from good days to bad days, but with this bias, the basic message continues that we should get somewhere, get something, experience something that lasts and belongs to us. The tempo may slow down, but the push goes on. Such biases (*asava*) occur around the hunger for sense-input or 'sensuality' (*kamasava*) 'being or becoming something' (*bhavasava*) and plain old 'missing the point' or 'Unknowing' (*avijjasava*). They are also called 'influxes' because they flow into the way the mind operates, and therefore influence the way it apprehends and relates to experience.

We all might agree, for example, that a rose is beautiful, without pausing to acknowledge that the labelling 'beautiful' occurs in our minds: dogs and toads don't experience roses as beautiful. Not that they're 'ugly' either. This influx is a problem because it sets up a mentality that clings to sense-objects, may get obsessed and possessive about them, and fears and grieves over their inevitable change and demise. Exchange 'roses' for 'my body' and the analogy probably becomes clearer. This influx of sensuality is a basis for suffering. It tells us that the only things that are around, including a lot of what we take ourselves to be, are sensory objects – but we can't retain the pleasant ones, nor can we avoid the unpleasant ones. Things keep changing. However we can't bear and dwell in that recognition unless the mind has its own stability and resources. Hence meditative training is to bring spiritual support in terms of 'factors of Awakening' to the fore. These, which represent the resources and the way to the Awakened awareness are: mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture/uplift, calm/tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity.

The influx of 'becoming' is the temporal sense that our identity is based upon: I am a being in time with a past, who has arrived at this present and will persist into this future. The clarity of meditation allows one to experience in the present that all the past is a memory occurring now, the future is an expectation occurring now, and what one is in the present is an awareness of senses, ideas, impressions and reactions that come and go. This present awareness can't be found in any object or process of consciousness. So if this most essential quality isn't locatable in terms of what we normally assume is what we are...why do we base so much of our lives on it?

Well, we miss the point. This is the main obstacle, the major influx: that of Unknowing, of not being in touch with this present awareness. If we're not in touch with that, we can't train it to integrate into our lives.

Unknowing is the absence, or the covering-up of full unbiased awareness. In specific instances it may mean that a person has a very restricted access to qualities such as trust, self-respect, or empathy. At times this Unknowing flares up for all of us: we may feel stressed at addressing a large number of people; we may feel miserable at being on our own; we are subject to paranoia and feeling of pointlessness unless we are with something that reassures or uplifts us. We've missed our own value and present freedom. This is the effect of Unknowing: we get lost in a trance of what we should, might, and maybe aren't and then lock into these constricted states of being.

Meditative training can clear these influxes. It is only then that we can live in an unbiased and unafflicted way. But of course, the more thoroughly we can work on dispelling afflicted mental states in our daily lives, the easier our access to the factors of Awakening will be. And when we understand meditation and its peaceful states to be a means and not an end in their own right, the less we're going to get caught in the influx of trying to become calmer and calmer. There can be a lot of suffering in that!

What is the Path?

At first approach, meditation can appear to be a series of techniques that stand apart from the other activities of life. This notion has some truth in it: meditation certainly gets well-established and thrives in a situation where we can be alone, or sitting quietly with friends, in a place that is free from disturbances. It's good to set aside a time every day when we change gear and let go of how we normally operate and even who we assume ourselves to be. However, this idea can put us out of touch with the cultivation of a Path to Awakening in which how we speak and act have a crucial part to play. Ideally the way we do the things we do in our daily life should feed into the meditation, and the attitudes and understanding that arise out of meditation should feed back into our daily lives. So that, even though we may change gear, we're still riding the same vehicle in the same direction. And the direction is a simple yet profound one: towards the complete release from suffering and stress. This, rather than any esoteric ideal or theory, is what Awakening is about.

So of course meditation is supposed to affect how we feel in the long term; and it's probably also obvious this means that it brings around changes in how we act. However it's sometimes not fully understood that how we act is a necessary precondition for meditation. In fact, if meditation doesn't make use of the strength and purpose that we've employed in the wider sphere of our lives, it is like a plant with poor roots. Meditation is going to be positively affected if we have geared our minds in terms of compassion, honesty and clarity. If our speech is harsh, it affects how we think and our awareness has to receive the results of that — not to mention the feedback we get from other people if we act in these ways. To put it simply, what we do has an immediate effect on how we will be. It is also very much the case

that if we are generous, responsible and looking towards Awakening in our lives, actions that issue from those roots will have a beneficial effect.

The process whereby actions have effects is called '**kamma**'. The truth of kamma is an aspect of the truth of mutual conditioning (or interdependence): that is, all states arise dependent on others. Just as ice needs water and a certain temperature in order to manifest, or as our bodies need air, water and physical food to keep going, so our awareness – the 'heart' of the mind – can only manifest in terms of the conditions that we have established it in as the daily norm. In ethical terms, this conditionality also means that the good we have done will lay down a residue of brightness and support: it can't be otherwise. If this weren't the case, there would be no real benefit in kindness, generosity or doing good, and no harm in violence and dishonesty. So there would be no sense of right and wrong, and no Path going anywhere. But because we can sense that there is a purpose in doing good, there is a Path – and it leads out of inflicting pain on ourselves and others. The purpose of this Path is to get out of suffering. So the understanding of kamma is the core of Buddhism. It is called **right view**, (*samma-ditthi*) the first factor of the Buddha's Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path covers the way we live: right view deals with basic attitudes and norms, right intent relates to our directed intentions, to what we aim to bring forth in our lives. These represent the 'wisdom' aspect of the Path. Right speech, right action and right livelihood deal with how we get on with our lives in their changing context – this is about goodness and virtue. Right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration cover the cultivation of awareness – the 'meditation' aspect of the Path. To offer a brief overview of the eight factors, I'd like to reflect on the three factors which generate and support all the others – right view, right effort and right mindfulness.

Right view gives personal immediate value to any factor: for example I recognize that if I cultivate right speech, whatever anyone else thinks about me, I can live free from regret and with a clear heart. Right view is therefore regarded as the paramount Path factor because it not only sets up the parameters for the other factors by outlining the truth of kamma, but it also suggests where we need to look for Awakening. That is, we need to access, dwell in and draw from that awareness in us which respects others and ourselves and does not wish to harm others or ourselves; we need to centre ourselves in that heart which inclines towards trusting and being trustworthy, helping and appreciating how we have been helped. This is the sense of 'conscience and concern' (*hiri-ottappa*) that values all life. Conscience and concern are natural qualities: that is they are present when we are at ease and fully authentic. However, these qualities get buried by abusive or deluded behaviour – and they get acquired through any attitude that gives more value to what we can get and make and have than to goodness of heart. This is wrong view. So if the ability to respect, to love and experience gratitude has been buried under anxiety, mistrust and a sense of meaninglessness, we need to regain that capacity. Otherwise what kind of mind are we going to be meditating with?

The most damaging twist in the conditioning of wrong view is self-denigration. This is because if we don't amount to anything to ourselves, there's no confidence (and no point) in cultivating the mind or Awakening. Wrong view gets stimulated by attitudes which measure us in terms of performance. We acquire these through life in the human world. That is, we are valued by how well we do in terms of the quicksand world of material success and social status – in which there are more losers than winners. The result is that many of us incline at times to viewing ourselves as inadequate or born losers, that 'I'm not much good, so of course I can't expect much; and as I'm of little value, I have to work twice as hard for half the rewards just to be acceptable.' This view, which can linger in an unspoken way in the back of the mind, prevents us from fully appreciating the good that we have done – of which the bottom line is the bad that we could have done and haven't!

So with wrong view, we lose touch with the common ground: that we can all be of benefit to ourselves and others, and we all have the potential for Awakening. Without that confidence, all effort, even in meditation, is an attempt to prove that we are good enough. This never works: whatever good we do is never good enough while wrong view is intact. It distorts and finds fault with everything. So meditation shifts the criteria for self-regard away from performance and becoming something in the future towards one of valuing intrinsic goodness and bringing it forth. Otherwise our practice has no firm foundation and no sense of uplift.

Right effort, (*samma-vayamo*) the second of the three overriding factors, is described in four ways. Actually the ways are paired: one pair of efforts is that of uplifting and also protecting what is truly worthy in ourselves. What is truly worthy in ourselves gets revealed when, with right view, we come from an attitude of conscience and concern. Then the effort is to bring that intrinsic wisdom and goodness to bear on the mental and emotional afflictions that hold us back.

The other pair of right efforts involves putting aside and protecting the heart and mind from attitudes, thoughts and behaviour that degrade ourselves and others. There are aspects of moral conduct that are quite natural to pick up when we reflect on the pain of abusive behaviour. However, we don't always recognize that the psychology of self-denigration also has to be cleaned from our ongoing awareness: ill will as often spoils our perception of ourselves as it does that of others. Is it possible to contemplate and check the voice of self-criticism? If we are still and focusing on ourselves, can we feel OK with that? Do we find that part of our need to be busy is to stop the mood swinging back to the default of feeling hopeless and inadequate? It's not that we have no shortcomings, but when these get the exclusive block capital headlines, this is ill-will, an absence of graciousness towards ourselves. And the fruition of this form of ill-will is doubt – the sense that my life has no meaning and no purpose. Between ill-will and doubt are hankering, dullness, and restless worry. So right view on effort is to understand that it's for cleansing the mind, so that we can bring forth our best for ourselves and others.

If there is right view, the hindrances can be approached as habits conditioned into the mind, rather than as something that we really are. Then our practice is both to cut the behaviour attitudes and scenarios that support these afflictive habits, and with mindfulness to see that they're based on no real identity. So the balance of effort in all aspects of the Path is struck by entering into a fundamental trust and appreciation of one's aware heart. Then because one is worthy, one casts off attitudes and behaviour that are not worthy of oneself. We incline towards curing the sickness rather than punishing the patient.

Right mindfulness (*samma-sati*) is the factor that brings right view and right effort into specific application in any aspect of the Path. It is an attention that is sustained over what is presently arising in our awareness – within ourselves or in the situation around us. It places our focus on present clarity rather than the way it should be, or the way I'm supposed to be, or what you're always like, and what will happen if... So it curtails personal history and the descriptions through which we have grown to regard ourselves and others. This radical simplicity and freedom from bias attends to moods, thoughts, sensations, energies and passions as arising in the present rather than life-journey luggage that we are pleased or disgusted with. When with right view, we understand the nature of afflictions as conditions rather than as self, they can be handled as itinerant blemishes without adding shame and guilt to the pile of stress. This handling is mindfulness. So mindfulness is a 'pure approach' because it sees things purely as they are.

As it is applied to the specific presence of a phenomenon, right mindfulness brings around the realisation of change – that a feeling or a thought moves in a pattern of rising up and subsiding. We don't have to do a whole lot with it. This realisation alleviates the immediate

reactivity by which confused habits and hindrances gain power. As we thus weaken the power of those reactions, mindfulness puts us in touch with a purity which they generally obscure. This process is notably (but not exclusively) the case with the formal exercises of mindfulness that constitute meditation. In these, through attending within a prescribed frame of reference (such as breathing in and out) we challenge the habits that get built into our normal activities. That is, in normal life, we attend to something because it promises us well-being, or because we have to: these are habits of expectation or compulsion that are sources of stress. In meditation we attend to how things are in order to strengthen attention itself. If we get bored, we acknowledge the bored state as it is, rather than react to it. If it persists and begins to capture attention, we work with it in various ways. And so on with restlessness, sorrow...and all the mood swings that normally govern our lives; mindfulness keeps the attention from being swayed. In this way, meditation is of supreme importance in living a responsible and free life.

Mindfulness is also a something that connects us to the refreshing 'rest states' of **right concentration** (*samma-samadhi*). For a beginner, an appreciation of what this might be occurs whenever there's an experience of mental stillness – even for a few seconds. The uplift of experiencing this is a special kind of pleasure, that of restful awakeness. This kind of pleasure doesn't cause the attention to jump or contract around it; it is spacious and offers an opportunity for our attention to deepen into it. It is an ease that nourishes and strengthens. This is the calm well-being of right concentration.

As I've explained them, the three main Path factors support each other in a consecutive sense. It's also the case that the support runs the other way. If there's no right effort, no encouraging and abstaining, then how do we clear away wrong view? And if there's no right mindfulness, how do we know where and to what degree to apply effort? Clearing cobwebs with a sledgehammer is more likely to do harm than good. So the Path is more a circle than a ladder. Mindfulness takes us into the enjoyment of inner purity which is the flowering of right view. We recognize that good kamma makes us feel good; and that insight deepens confidence in the Path as a whole.

So meditation is not a matter of trying to get somewhere or become something, but of Awakening to a purity that is already with us but has been obscured. And as that purity is fully revealed, it is freed from obscurity; being freed it does not depend on this or that. Eventually it doesn't even depend on a Path: the Path leads to its own transcending.

But in terms of where we are now, practice hinges around accessing and using the wisdom and goodness towards which all the eight Path factors contribute. If there's no access to wisdom or goodness, then the meditation is not going to flow. And if meditation has to be forced or supported by beliefs, then, rather than give rise to a natural unfolding, it adds more layers over the purity. Heart and mind don't become peaceful on demand. But they can attune to and settle into an Awakening process: the process that brings peace to our ongoing life.

Theory: the Sublime States

This is how you should train yourself: 'Kindness...compassion...empathic joy...equanimity as my release of awareness, will be developed, pursued, made into a vehicle, given a grounding, steadied, consolidated, and well-undertaken.' [Ang Eights, 63]

There are four mind-states that sustain the practice of Buddhism in relationship both to others and to ourselves. These four – kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), empathic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*) – are called ‘sublime states’ (*brahmavihara*). They are ways of directing awareness with an intent that is amply endowed, uplifted, without boundaries, free from hatred and ill-will – to others as to oneself.

Lofty as they may sound, these sublime states are based on our ability to relate to other beings and ourselves in a healthy way in the changing circumstances that make up our world. If we don't develop these basic attitudes, we can't meet the world in an adequate way. The way that we relate becomes marked with mistrust and frustrated needs – syndromes that hinder the true potential of the heart. In the worst instances, we eventually close the heart and assume it's impossible to meet the world at all.

We may recognize that we have limitations in this respect: ‘I'm fine with you on a good day in a low-pressure situation’; ‘I respect myself when I'm doing well and getting some positive attention.’ So there are limitations, and these form boundaries within which I feel alive and receptive, and outside of which I start to go numb, or seek to escape. I escape from the hurt of feeling left out or of failing by shutting down sensitivity and turning my attention elsewhere....These sublime states are therefore not just about being nice to other people; they are about freeing ourselves from deadening reactions. Ill-will is a kind of sickness.

If we can extend goodwill more constantly, independent of circumstance, our ability to be free from underlying states of guilt, anxiety, bitterness, cynicism and depression increases. All such states are products of ill-will. Other more prominent aspects of ill-will are hatred, spite and abuse; even when it is the act of belittling another being in one's own mind. Such thinking may have serious consequences: the prejudice that justifies violence is based on the bias that other beings don't count for much. And thinking in such abusive ways also undermines the well-being of the thinker.

Correct cultivation of the sublime states can go deeply into any ‘life-statement’ we may have and bring around a shift: we can come out of being the victim (who has to put up with feeling abused and second-rate) the renegade (who has to fight against their world) or the survivor (who endures the mess they experience their world as being). All this semi-anaesthetised ill-will stems from being unable to release fear or grief or anger. If we don't use benevolence and compassion to acknowledge a hurt state and heal it, we are forced to manage it by shrugging it off, blaming others, or assuming that somehow we shouldn't expect anything better.

The truth of the heart is that these ‘sublime’ states are innate; they get sealed off by curtailing the very process whereby painful feelings heal themselves. That is, if the heart is open, it can be fully with the hurt, and give it the energy that allows it to heal. Just as the body does to its wounds. The sense of feeling hurt is a natural effect, like a bruise, that redresses itself when we stay with it in an open and clear way. But when the heart is not able or willing to be with its hurts, the process is cut short. Shortcuts include lashing out at whatever has triggered that pain, or criticising the sense of hurt as weak or foolish, or not acknowledging the painful feeling. We may even dismiss sensitivity altogether. Then instead of a temporary retraction,

we get a long-term contraction. We give up on love and compassion as natural states and get tough or indifferent instead. The heart contracts out of openness to avoid getting hurt – but a contracted awareness can't experience joy and trust. So we become anxious, and feel that we have to be something, or have something, or be approved of in order to feel OK. Living with this kind of management is a dismal actuality for many of us – for some or all of the time: our life can feel intrinsically flawed, despite our best efforts.

The practices of kindness, compassion etc. don't rest upon manufacturing emotional states. They are based upon ways of adjusting our impressions to allow a natural relational health to come forth. We practise the sublime states not just for someone else's sake, but for releasing our own awareness from the cramp of cynicism or bitterness. So the cultivation of *metta* isn't about imposing an ideal of liking or loving everyone all the time, but a specific practice of meeting the mood of the moment without aversion: 'I can be with, not add to, and let go of the jealousy or resentment that has just arisen.' This non-aversion frees up the intent of the mind and allows a return to the natural state of kindness and compassion.

If we can prevent disappointment and conflict from cramping into ill-will, we don't have to dump our ill-will onto others to find some relief. We can stop complaining about the way other people are. If we can stop complaining about others, we may also release ourselves from complaining about how we ourselves are. So the two aspects of the practice – towards ourselves and towards others – support each other. We may still feel the pang of losing contact with something pleasant, or of being touched by something unpleasant, and yet be able to curtail the contraction into bitterness or depression. We can support ourselves in feeling the feeling and letting it flow through. We may still feel some hurt, but we don't get damaged by it. As always, mindfulness is the key.

We enter the practice by first establishing a mind-state that is not at this time affected by ill-will. Then we reflect and linger on that state. The very fact of bringing attention onto a state of well-being, or basic OK-ness, amplifies it. Further practice entails extending that awareness over our whole state of being. Often we are divided: there are aspects that we can acknowledge, are comfortable with, or accept and aspects that we are half-aware of, feel ill at ease with, or dread. The divisions form inner boundaries. These boundaries are often marked by being ashamed of or trying to control the unacceptable mood that we sense beyond them. We may for example, feel intimidated or irritated by other people's behaviour, and not know how to handle that feeling. So we close that uncomfortable feeling off behind a boundary. Another boundary may separate what I am to myself from how I appear to others: I dread others seeing, even sympathetically, some of my emotions and moods. These boundaries then inform how I sense others. For example, how I sense others may be characterised as 'that which I cannot relax or feel trust with; those whom I'm inferior to.' But you can't really be good-hearted to people if you see them through the fence of mistrust. The priority therefore is to first unlock the relational process by clearing the internal ill-will when one is alone, and then when one is with others. This is the case whether the state is kindness, compassion, empathic joy or equanimity.

The four states differ in their character and also in terms of the illness that they are applied to. Kindness has a nourishing quality; it has the intent to touch into the good and then to extend it. Compassion is the protective intent: to sense the afflicted, shield it from further damage and heal it. Empathic joy senses and participates in others' goodness and good fortune; equanimity serenely stays with the good and the bad, understanding them both to be kamma – processes rather than personal belongings.

These practices are to be extended to others. We may feel ourselves unwilling to be in someone's presence or give them much attention; even when we think of them, there is a retraction of heart with irritation or fear. So this would call for kindness: an inclination that

senses the lovability of another person and moves towards providing welfare and nourishment. When we are aware of the limitations or disabilities of others, compassion is the response that counteracts the intention to abuse, belittle or dismiss them: we acknowledge their vulnerability and pain, their need for shelter and protection, and empathize with that. Empathic joy counteracts jealousy and apathy towards others: wanting them to enjoy their good fortune means that we share in that happiness. Equanimity counteracts the tendency to get excited or depressed over events in the world or in the lives of other people. How we actually proceed from these states into action depends on what a situation allows: the general advice is to relax, stay present, and act naturally....

As mentioned above, the sublime states help us to cross over the boundaries that create divisions. So we need first of all to find the boundary that is present by investigating the particular source of the division – whether it's because at this time and place 'I don't regard you as acceptable to me' or 'I don't regard myself as acceptable to you' or even 'I'm not acceptable to myself.' Maybe in some situations you intimidate me, and I feel out-of-empathy with you. There is a boundary within which the awareness contracts and starts piling up states of fear, shame and irritation like sandbags. The first part of the practice is to curtail that piling up. *So we separate the state from what has evoked it:* here is my sense of being intimidated by you; can I be with that emotion and leave 'you' and 'me' out of it? I put aside blaming you and despising myself. Then we can keep handling the state until we are no longer caught in it: it's a conditioned thing, it's not somebody's fault. After this, we can extend awareness in that same vein: I can imagine you outside of this particular relationship, as in the same predicament as myself – subject to birth, infirmity and death, not wanting pain, wanting happiness, needing to eat and sleep, and feel safe. Recollecting our shared and obvious needs can restore the empathy that is the basis of a healthy relationship.

Now when I don't react to or affirm a negative mood: isn't there a possibility to feel the sadness of this habit; and doesn't that arouse some wish for my own welfare? And what comes up when I imagine you as also subject to moods and conditioning? These are the positions that allow our *brahmavihara* potential to unfold naturally.

If we have a positive mood that arises with the perception of a person, or ourselves, the practice has the same approach: acknowledge the mood as distinct from the perception, and allow it to settle. The result is that the positive mood gathers mindfulness and full awareness. Then, rather than swapping the changing reality of agreeable feeling or impression for some gratifying image, we can relate clearly to the feeling and the impression without hanging on to it and making it into a person who has to be that way all the time. (And will probably not be like that all the time...and thus the disappointment begins...) The fulfilment of kindness is also the end of romance. This is not a misty process. We have to be able to let each other be changeable. Otherwise, adulation causes attachment and disappointment.

So the practice of the *brahmavihara* is very direct. Eventually it's not even about me and you, but more about how we relate. It refers to the activation that occurs in the mind when it contacts a thought an impression or a feeling. Right here, before self and other begin, is the place to bring up the intent: 'may there be no blame, no fear, no regret, no wavering.' Then in fact one of the major sources of suffering and agitation, and of the positions that self-view gets founded on, has no room to grow. It is for this reason that the Buddha highlighted the *brahmavihara* as a deliverance of the heart to be fully cultivated. Their relevance and benefits are available to us all.

Kindness

Centre your awareness in your body, being aware of the general form of the posture, and the textures of the body. Acknowledge the spine and the structures that support the body's mass. Imagine you are sitting in an armchair, or in a warm bright place that makes you feel good. Give yourself time to take that in. Let the steady rhythm of your breathing come to your attention....Sense how that is maintaining your life, with each in-breath and out-breath washing energy through the body. Feel the pulses in the body, governing the warm blood flow through the tissues. Take in the sense of all this as carrying and supervising your life force.

Draw your attention steadily from the most central core of your body out through the mass that surrounds it...the firm or soft tissues. Consider the vitality and sensitivity of all this. Pick up the sense of wishing it well, the inclination towards its health. Move that warm sense around the body, including places that feel unwell or neutral as well as vigorous.

Draw your attention out to the surface of your body; to how you sense the skin. Be aware of it like a sheet or a blanket enclosing your person. Be aware of it as a protective boundary; and also acknowledge it as something that connects inner to outer and is porous. Feel the energies at this boundary tingling and pulsing as your body senses the outer world. Move between what is inside the skin – any sense of being ‘in here’ – and the sense of ‘out there.’ Acknowledge the alertness at this periphery; settle and calm there, keeping one's sense of ‘out there’ to be the space just a few centimetres in front of the body. Complete this space, sensing it wrapping the entire body like a second skin – above, below, in front, behind. Let your awareness move into this in this way, just as it has moved from the core to the surrounding tissues in the body. Sense this space as a further, subtle layer, a finer skin that can also enclose, protect and connect in a suffusive way. Acknowledge the benevolence, the inclination to nurture.

Contemplate the energy of connection, that which attunes to balance and harmony between inner and outer. Sit, stand, walk or recline in that, letting the awareness take in the benevolence of the connected space.

Imagine the space itself sensing your body. Let the energy in the space radiate back over your skin...rather like a warm sun. First from the forward direction, over the general bodily form, then a zone at a time. Begin with the abdomen, letting the space receive the breathing movement there and take that in...then up over the chest...and any held or stiff places...and then over the throat, keeping a spacious sense that allows full, easy breathing. Finally let the energy wash over the face – the mouth, cheeks, eyes and brow – bathing each area and organ with kindness. If there are difficulties with this, try to recollect an occasion when one received some kindness from another person. Recall how that felt, return to that feeling, and try to sit within that in the present. Work kindness into the tissues, moving around the entire body.

Come back to the sensed space and acknowledge that this extends further out. Get a sense of the boundlessness, without going out. Stay connected to the body, from its core through to its periphery and into the immediate space, but let your sensing go out as if you were feeling out the space around you. Let the sense of benevolence extend with that awareness, aiming at nothing in particular, while maintaining the connection to the body. Settle into that sense of extended, unhindered openness with no object.

Imagine someone you are fond of or someone you respect is going to move into that extended space. Notice if the energy changes, and stay connected to your bodily presence. Let the imagination rest. Bring up that impression of a friend several times, acknowledging any effects in terms of mood, and to what extent that affects your energy. Integrate the energy into the entire body, especially the back of the body. Don't lose parts of your body, or switch off parts of your extended awareness. With the exercise of staying centred and whole, allow the

friend to come nearer and be at a comfortable distance in front of you. Take in and send out the energy of well-being and kindness. Then let them move away, and maintain the energy and inclination of kindness.

Practise like this with a known person towards whom one has mixed feelings. Then with a neutral acquaintance. Don't attach to the mood changes. Keep the sense of connected space, your own bodily presence and the sense of exchanging energy: receive what is out there, and send forth what is in here. If what is out there seems unbalanced or overwhelming, consolidate your own presence by sensing the bodily core, then the surrounding mass, then the skin and the space immediately around. Let what is received wash over the periphery and be assimilated there, allowing it in as feels appropriate. You can conclude the practice there, or take it further.

If you choose to go further, practise like this with someone whose presence brings up negative states: perhaps of a milder degree at first, beginning with someone whom you caricature or make fun of – that lack of graciousness, that removal of dignity. Invite them into a connected space where you acknowledge the shared dilemmas and joys of existence. Then practise with the perception of someone whom you think does not respect or like you – that lack of warmth. Then maybe someone who brings up anxiety. At first as if they were distant...and then coming closer at a pace and to a proximity with which you feel comfortable.

Keep your own presence clear. Whatever is received or comes up, keep your own conscious sending-forth free from the wish to harm or blame. Keep your awareness connected to your own presence, to the impression of the other and to the space between you. Align your intentions to holding and letting the energy in that connection be free from ill-will. Allow moods, perceptions and reactions to arise within that connected space. Staying open allows them to subside within that kindly space. You can conclude the practice there, or take it further.

Practise this with perceptions of people whom you think lowly of or despise, then those that bring up stronger aversion. Then pick up the less pleasing aspects of someone whom you generally like; and the worthy aspects of someone you dislike. The practice is to receive these perceptions and moods in a warm space, relaxing any contractions of ill-will.

Then practise in this way with perceptions of yourself: from the favoured and successful and competent to the unfavourable, flawed, and inadequate. 'I have to carry all this, may I be well. May I hold this in an extended and kindly awareness.'

After an appropriate period of time, let the imagination rest, and wrap the kindness around and within your bodily presence.

Difficulties

You may assume that you have to bring up a positive loving attitude before it begins by itself. Part of the skill of the practice is to sense where a non-averse, at ease, state can be felt already and tuning in to that. Another part is to stay out of, or put aside, topics and impressions that generate ill-will, resentment, or depression, until you have the resources to heal those states. The sense of dwelling in kindness, rather than having to feel it, will then gradually grow by itself.

I choose beginning with the body because it doesn't carry negativity in terms of topics; and also because tuning into the body brings the mind out of its topics and also out of its agitated or depressed energies. However, you may also begin the practice by recollecting good people,

or kind actions that have been done to you in your life. And further, good actions that you have done (or unskilful behaviour that you have put aside).

Sometimes we don't detect kindness. Consider it as an 'at home, no pressure' feeling.

Sometimes we don't detect ill-will. Consider people whom you assume to be less intelligent, less caring, less physically capable than yourself. How would you feel about being with them, talking with them, dining with them, or working together? How do you feel about people of different ethnicity, gender, or social status? If you detect a shrinking away sense, can you be with that and relax that boundary? Outside of meditation, what would help you to do that?

If this form doesn't help you....

Focus your practice on an animal that you feel warmed or delighted by.

Try talking about your life or your concerns with a sympathetic listener. If you don't feel that you have one, try helping other people and listening to them.

Further

Focus on the experience of goodwill as a mental phenomenon. Sense the energy of it spreading out, and letting go of the images and impressions that support it, use it as a base for concentration.

